AWAKENINGS 2

A MULTI-MEDIA ZINE

AWAKENINGS
2

CONTENTS

Tainted Blood — (Forever Knight/Highlander) 1
by ***Tenaya***.....

Night of the Mesmerizing Kiss — (Wild Wild West) 23
by ***Theresa Kyle***.....

Night of the Surprise — (Wild Wild West) 37
by ***Mary Millard***.....

The Night of Revelations — (Wild Wild West) 45
by ***Taliesin***.....

Foreshadowing — (Starsky & Hutch) 50
by ***Kate McChesney***.....

Filling in the Spaces — (DS9) 51
by ***DVS***.....

For Want of a Screwdriver — (Quantum Leap) 65
by ***Leah Starsky***.....

Endgame — (Hunt for Red October) 71
by ***Taliesin***.....

A Reason to Stay — (Houston Knights) 79
by ***Calico***.....

No Need to Break a Leg — (Houston Knights) 113
by ***Calico***.....

My Tangled State of Mind — (Wiseguy) 123
by ***Martha Bonds***.....

Trilander — (Highlander) 133
by ***Arch Ant***.....

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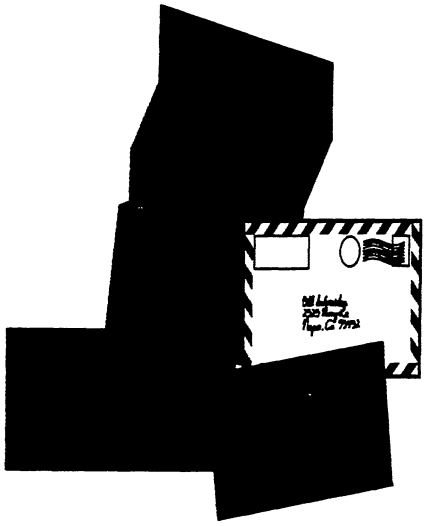


EDITORIAL

Welcome to the second issue of Awakenings. Nine fandoms are represented in this issue. I sincerely hope that you enjoy reading it as much as I enjoyed putting it together. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all those who contributed. I hope they will do so again in the future. I do plan future issues. Awakenings 3 is planned for MediaWest '97, as well as another issue of Classified Affairs (Man from Uncle), and an UNCLE novel. Later in the year I plan a Wiseguy slash zine.

Special thanks go to Jan Davies for her proofreading efforts, Suzan Lovett for her beautiful cover art, and Martha Bonds for moral support.

Well, as usual, it's 1:30 a.m. and I have to get up for work at 7:30 a.m. I'm still writing this editorial and to make things worse I still have one blank page to fill. I hate white space. I do this to myself everytime. I insist on starting my stories on a right hand page. The problem is that stories don't always end on the left. And I'm fresh out of ideas. So...if you turn to page 112 you can see my solution to the problem was to throw the page open to the reader's imagination.

Comments and suggestions are welcome, and in fact encouraged. You may write me either snail mail or e-mail me at Napasha@aol.com. Submissions for future issues may be submitted either by mail or through the net, and on disk or paper. The deadline for the next issue is April 20th, 1997.

So go on, read and hopefully, enjoy.

Marion

TAINTED BLOOD

by Tenaya

Seacouver, 1995:

"Look, Richie, I'm only going on about this because it's important. You've got to start thinking with your head or you are going to lose it." Adam Pierson, aka Methos, the oldest living Immortal, put all the sincerity he had into his plea.

"Yeah. Like a lot you know." Richie Ryan was sullen. He twirled his beer about by the handle and wished Adam would go away. He was in the mood tonight for the blues, a beer and some quality time with MacLeod. Well, here at Joe's Tavern he had all three and the pesky Adam Pierson to boot. He didn't know why Mac allowed that guy to hang around. He glanced up at Mac and saw the concern written all over his face. Perhaps he could get Mac to send him away.

"Richie, I know what I'm talking about. Do you know that the best sex I have **ever** had in my entire life was an incredibly sick, yet intense experience with someone who would make Kristen look like Rebecca of Sunnybrooke Farm?"

Duncan MacLeod glanced at Adam and raised a skeptical eyebrow.

Richie leaned forward in his chair. This was the sort of history he found interesting. "Really? What did she look like?"

"Richie!" Duncan chided.

"Oh no! There is no way I'm going to tell either of you about that. And besides, this is exactly what I'm talking about! You have got to smarten up and not let your...desires make your decisions for you!" Adam continued. He was agitated and his voice was beginning to carry.

Duncan leaned forward. "Adam, calm down. This is neither the time nor the place." Richie, on the other hand, was enjoying hearing Mac reprimand someone other than himself for a change.

Adam slumped back in his chair. "Yes, all right," he said tersely. He looked away. The fingers of his right hand began a rapid, nervous drumming on the table.

Duncan shook his head. "What is wrong with you? You've been acting jumpy for the last few days."

"Nothing. Nothing at all," he snapped. Now it was Adam's turn to be sullen.

Duncan looked between the two of his friends. "Look, guys. Can we lighten up a little? Joe's gonna get real pissed if..."

Suddenly, Adam sat straight up, his head twisting in a slow swivel from side to side. If Richie didn't know better, he would have thought that an Immortal had just come into range, but he felt nothing. "Mac?" he questioned.

MacLeod shook his head, baffled.

Adam's eyes grew round and he seemed ready to bolt from his seat.

"Adam? What is it?" MacLeod was uneasy and very worried.

"Where is the nearest Catholic church?" Adam spoke softly, almost distractedly. His attention was definitely elsewhere.

"What?" Richie gave his head a brief shake, the non-sequitur nearly giving him a brain-strain.

"Out the door, to your left for 3 blocks, then right for another two. Why?"

Adam reached up and clasped the object he wore around his neck. It lay underneath his sweater and he fingered it through the heavy material. He glanced worriedly at MacLeod. "Have you ever encountered vampires?"

"Adam..." MacLeod was exasperated. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Dear god. I have to go. It's best if you stay here with Richie. I'll be back when I can." He stood up without another word and was out the door before MacLeod and Richie had done more than stare at each other in bafflement.

"We go after him, right?" Richie asked. Richie didn't think it was safe for unbalanced immortals to be wandering about on their own.

Mac nodded, obviously filled with consternation" You're damn right." They ran for the door.

"I don't understand. Why is this one so special?"

LaCroix was excited, the hunt giving them both a sharp edge that was intoxicating. Glorious anticipation tormented him with such sweet pain that it made him feel quite generous, for tonight he would claim something he had waited six hundred years for. "Natalie, there is so much for you to unlearn. You accepted the truth about vampires, and now it is time to learn about beings who call themselves Immortals."

"More secrets. Great. What else did Nick neglect to tell me?" she asked sarcastically. She was still steamed about what she viewed as her betrayal by Nicolas. In the act of 'bringing her across,' he drank too much of her blood and with her life on the line, he had chosen to let her die rather than to do what he had promised. And what she had wanted for a very long time.

LaCroix smiled. He enjoyed the freshness of her emotions. Anger was such a useful tool. "Actually, I'm not sure Nicolas knows about these. So you see, you already know something that he does not."

"Sometimes I wish you had killed him." She was in a mood to pout. "Sealing him up in that crypt doesn't seem like enough punishment for me. He was going to let me die, and after he'd just promised me we would always be together."

LaCroix couldn't blame her for how she felt. When Nicolas chose to have LaCroix end both his own and Natalie's life instead of bringing her across, LaCroix knew he had allowed events to progress too far. Extreme measures were called for. Instead of staking Nicolas through the heart as his protégé had wanted, LaCroix used the post to knock him senseless. Then it took all the skill he had to spirit Natalie back from the eternal void she had nearly slipped into and welcome her into the realm of forever night. Soon afterwards they had left Toronto and embarked on a journey with no specific destination in mind. Anywhere was fine as long as it was not Toronto.

"His 'punishment' may not be enough--for you. But for him, as the years stretch on, it will give him the time he needs to truly wallow in his guilt, until even **he** will have his fill of it. When his penance is done, we will let him out. His anger at being imprisoned will have burned away the emotions that were suffocating him. He will want to live again." He favored her with a fervent look. "Then you will have the pleasure to know the real Nicolas!"

Natalie tossed her hair back. "If you say so." She wasn't convinced, but who was she to disagree with the one who had given her what she had long desired--immortality. He was her master now and she had found that he was not nearly as bad as Nick had led her to believe he was. "So, what is it we are doing here?"

"You're going to help me capture this man, then you will be left to your own devices for a night or two. Try to enjoy yourself."

"Daddy Takes A Holiday?"

It was a good thing that LaCroix appreciated her sarcasm. "Something like that."

"Let's do it."

LaCroix smiled fondly. Natalie really did have a knack for being a vampire. It was a pity that Nicolas had not been the one to bring her across.

Methos paused at the first alley he came to. He could feel them out there, circling about. Definitely more than one. Vampires. He shook his head; it was useless to try to convince someone that they were real, particularly when that someone was as stubborn as MacLeod. It was better to try and draw them away from the unwary. And away from MacLeod. He was very important to Methos for a variety of reasons — some of them highly personal.

He could feel the suggestion compelling him to walk down the street and into the park. The summons was an irresistible siren's call and to defy it was causing him to break out in a cold sweat.

It had to be LaCroix. That had to have been why events of over six hundred years ago had been leaping to mind every time he wasn't actively thinking about something else. LaCroix had to have found him and now wanted him again. Wanted to have their bodies entwined together...

Furious at yet another unbidden vision of lust and passion, he grimaced. "Not if I can bloody well help it!"

He glanced uncertainly into the alley. That could be a trap, too, but at least it was still in the direction of the church. He reached up and took off his necklace. He now held the simple but ancient silver cross by its black string. Taking a deep breath, he slipped through the shadows and into the alley.

A hundred feet in, he heard the barest of rasps behind him. He spun, holding the crucifix well out in front of him. A woman stood an arm's length away. She would have been considered pretty in a sisterly sort of way if her eyes had not been glowing an eerie orange color. She hissed, displaying a formidable set of canines. Her arm flashed out and she backhanded his hand, sending the cross flying into a pile of rubble.

"Please," he begged, backing away from her.

She advanced on him. "Funny. I've always wanted to have men begging me. Interesting that this is what it takes." She shrugged. "Whatever."

There was a clatter as the other two Immortals from the tavern sped into the alley and skidded to a stop just behind her.

"Jeez, Mac. Adam's afraid of a girl? What a wimp."

The 'girl' spun around, hissing. Her eyes blazed an even darker orange. She picked up the young Immortal and tossed him into a dumpster. She dusted her hands off. "Ain't *nobody* ever gonna call me 'girl' again."

She gave a challenging look at MacLeod. "You want some of what your buddy got?"

Duncan moved back a pace and drew out his katana. Holding the weapon warily out in front of him, he backed up towards the light cast by a

business' back entrance. "Adam, what the hell is going on here?" His voice was strained.

Natalie snorted. "Whew! You sure skip right to the rough stuff, big guy." She circled MacLeod carefully.

Adam started forward. "No!" The rest was cut off abruptly as he suddenly felt hands caressing his torso. Slow, sensuous strokes that dove low to his hips and came back up under his sweater. Hands that were warm, but still had the last vestiges of an unearthly coolness to them as they fondled harder, rubbing up to his nipples, pinching them sharply.

Methos groaned. He realized the memory fragments that had been projected at him were really a vampire's version of foreplay. Erotic, emotional, lustful; visions filled with want and hunger. And no matter how much he had tried to resisted them, they still had had the desired effect on him. It took everything he had to stop himself from turning about and giving his tormentor a deep, hard kiss. He had to swallow before he could speak. "LaCroix."

The deep, lyrical voice from the past contained a chuckle. "You remembered." He sounded pleased.

"Does it matter that I don't want this?" He brought his hands up to try to still the other's caresses.

"But I think you do. In fact, I can feel the heat in your blood, mon doux repas prefere[1]." The moist mouth found an ear lobe to suckle.

Duncan's sword sliced through the air where Natalie had been. Instantly she was behind him. She pushed him hard to the ground and followed to pin him there.

Methos, his eyes never leaving the struggle, tilted his head to allow LaCroix access to his neck. "Stop her, LaCroix. If you spare them, unharmed, I will go with you." He reached back for LaCroix's ass, giving it a firm, long squeeze. "I promise I will make it worth your while."

"As I thought; another of your promises, so freely given, so difficult to collect on."

The fight on the ground had escalated to where MacLeod was putting everything he had into the battle — and he was still losing.

For five thousand years, Methos had lived in many cultures and assumed a great variety of roles. Sometimes he got what he wanted by being straight forward, but most of the time it was by being oblique. And sometimes it was by surrendering. A sense of his priorities kept him focused and gave him purpose.

And old, well-learned techniques that had always brought results were never forgotten or out of fashion.

Methos leaned back against LaCroix, letting his body undulate in the most suggestive manner he could manage. "Tell her to stop."

The arms that encircled Methos constricted painfully, trapping him securely and holding him still. "Yes. All right." There was a tight, breathless quality to LaCroix's voice. His need was palpable, both from the psychic emanations from the vampire and from the growing bulge pressing against Methos' back. As to who had whom trapped was open to debate.

"Natalie...stop."

Slowly she did as requested, reluctantly removing herself to a few feet away from the Highlander. She continued to stare at him hungrily.

"You are not to touch them; do you understand?" LaCroix asked. His desire was so great, he began to move against Methos, unable to restrain his body from what it thirsted for.

MacLeod pushed himself up to his knees. "Adam!" He could see his friend was held immobile, enfolded by a much larger man; a

[1] My favorite sweet meal

man whose expression was both lecherous and victorious. "What the hell is going on?!" Duncan demanded, completely at a loss.

LaCroix smiled wickedly. He angled his head over Methos' long, slender neck and let his tongue lave slowly, sensuously over the exposed flesh. His eyes glittered with intensity as they stayed locked with MacLeod's, feasting on the alarm and anxiety that emanated from their brown depths.

"You can not help me, MacLeod," Methos said, defeatedly.

Duncan looked back at Methos and could see the fear and the resignation in the ancient Immortal's eyes. "Adam! Don't do this!" he pleaded.

With a slight sense of disorientation, Methos felt his feet leave the earth. LaCroix was flying him to somewhere. Straight up they went, but he kept eye contact with Duncan MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod until he was swallowed by the darkness. And he prayed with all his heart that he might be allowed to be returned to those strong arms, his place within them only just recently won by a combination of charm and pure doggedness.

England, 1349:

LaCroix's hunger was intense. His body burned with the need for sustenance, his cells crying out in their privation. He drifted above the desolate English countryside, the blackness of a moonless night causing the land below to be darker even than the night sky. Desperately, he searched for the flicker of a candle or the glow of a campfire; anything that would indicate a living soul.

But there was nothing. Nothing but decay and the stench of rotting corpses as they lay where they fell, with no one left to bury them. Village after village passed beneath him, all of them dead. The plague had suffered no survivors in this shire.

His hunger grew as he widened his search, following the river away from the market towns. He headed out into the hills where the population was scarce to begin with. Perhaps a shepherd, poacher or an outlaw still remained untouched by the taint of the Black Death. Once infected, the blood soured with its corruption and then death quickly followed. LaCroix had fed on so much of it that he could stand it no longer. The hunger was easier to deal with than a stomach full of putridity

He kept searching, heading further and further into the wilderness of the Marlborough Downs and wished again he had stayed with Nicolas in Paris, instead of coming here on a whim. Actually, it was less a whim than to spare himself the embarrassment of showing any of the jealousy that filled his cold heart as he watched Nicolas cavorting with his newest consort. Margarite was a female vampire, wild and daring, and she delighted in spurring LaCroix's protégé into acts of recklessness and...passion. She was an old acquaintance of LaCroix's, and he knew firsthand of her inherent cruelty. LaCroix hoped that if he left, depriving her of her audience, her desire to torment him would wither and then, predictably, she would tire of Nicolas. Then LaCroix could return to Paris.

The wind shifted, bringing the hint of wood smoke to him. "Ah..." he groaned, giving thanks to the goddess, Diana, for hearing his pleas. Then he sneered at his own words; old habits were hard to break, even to the extent of appealing to ancient gods that even he no longer believed in.

LaCroix turned his face into the wind and followed the scent. He was on the hunt, and he felt his blood quicken with the hope of replenishment.

He soon found the house; all alone in a shallow valley, a faint light seeping from around the

thin cracks of the window shutters. He landed lightly on the stone stoop, placed his hand on the door latch and hesitated, listening.

One. He could hear the slow and steady beat of one heart.

He could wait no longer and he was instantly in the house, standing in front of a table where a man sat writing in a large book, his back to the modest fire in the hearth.

The man startled and looked up, light brown eyes wide with alarm. "Who are you?" he demanded, setting his quill down, and gliding smoothly to his feet. He backed up a step.

Pleased at the healthy glow in the thin face, LaCroix decided to get to the point; his hunger would allow no delay. He stared hard into the frightened eyes, flooding his will over the young man, stealing from him the course of action. He advanced slowly on his stunned victim, maintaining his control.

"It matters not," he soothed, as he reached out to the figure clothed in a heavy wool robe. The pulse in the long, pale neck beckoned, enticing him with its promise of sweetness. He circled behind and brought his arms up around his dazed quarry, baring the throat. The change coursed through him like fire and he sank his teeth deep into the warm flesh. Blood flowed and he sucked eagerly at the wound...and was transported!

The taste! It was like nothing he'd ever had! It was...

Lightening crackled against his lips. Shocked, LaCroix was flung against the wall.

His victim staggered as awareness returned. A split second later, he bolted around the table and came up holding a sword. He pointed the blade at the vampire and started forward with a halting determination.

The man's impertinence angered LaCroix. With his preternatural speed, he was instantly inside the other's defenses. LaCroix stared down into the slighter man's terrified eyes. "Fool!" he sneered, then reached out and snapped his neck. LaCroix preferred to have the heart pumping while he ate, but it was not required. A meal that was fighting back with a sharp weapon was sure to be a meal that he would not enjoy.

He bit into the throat again and sucked hard, draining as much as he could, as fast as he could. The wonderful taste was still there but he gulped quickly, his hunger demanding volume rather than appreciation. But even still, his mind was flooded with images--the life experiences of his prey. Or at least, that's what should have happened, but the sheer number of the fragments cascading into LaCroix made him feel as if he was drowning. Confused and disturbed, he rejected the memories and finished, dropped his meal untidily to the ground.

Now that he was sated, he glanced uneasily about the room. Who was this man, and what was he doing out here? LaCroix stepped over the dead man and peered at the entry he'd been writing when he was interrupted. The script was clear and strong, but written very small and in perfect Latin. It was a journal or diary, and this page recorded the progression of the Black Death in the current year of 1349.

Curious, he settled into the chair, and thumbed the pages back. The decades fell away, then the centuries--all accurately recorded. Truths that were known at the time, but were now long since forgotten, stared out at him from the starkness of the vellum pages. This was a chronicle that covered over three centuries...and all written in the same hand. The exact same hand that had just been transcribing the current entry. How could that be?

Suddenly, his vision blurred and LaCroix felt the room spin. So intent had he been on the words, he hadn't noticed a strange tingling that now raced through his whole being. A pain, a warmth; it was everywhere. Small muscles in his eyelids and under the skin of his forearms twitched with the spreading current. The power

seemed to build, to coalesce and LaCroix found he could not breath. He knew **something** was about to happen and he gripped the table's edge tightly, fearfully. He was a **vampire,** immune to all threats but a few well-known dangers. But this feeling was unknown and he found himself wondering if he had just discovered a new way for a Prince of Darkness to die.

When it seemed like he could stand it no longer, he felt the energy course downward and discharge out into the floor with a small zapping sound. The air suddenly smelt of lightning.

He sat dazed, wondering what had just occurred. And into that silence he heard something else; the beating of a human heart.

LaCroix stared at the man on the floor. It came as no surprise when the man jerked and gasped, his eyes springing open.

LaCroix nodded slowly. "That, explains a great deal," he drawled.

Methos took in a great, shuddering breath. The confusion that was common after a fatal event was even worse this time. He stared up at the rough-hewed ceiling and tried to recall what had taken his life, but he couldn't think straight and he was having trouble catching his breath. What...

The sound of a chair being pushed back startled him and he tried to lift his head. A weakness was upon him though, and he was only able to turn his face toward the danger. A man, tall and pale approached. He stopped and stared down at Methos, a look of casual interest in his expression.

"What..." Methos tried to asked, but he found his mouth parched, his throat too dry to speak.

This seemed to amuse his visitor. "Do you thirst?" he inquired. "I imagine you might." He caught up a pitcher of water from the sideboard and knelt down.

A strong arm slipped under Methos and pulled him into a sitting position. The movement made his head swim and he was only vaguely aware of the crockery cool against his lips.

"Drink!" The command was both heard and felt, and it was irresistible.

He swallowed weakly as the cool fluid flowed into his mouth and streamed over his chin. It was near to choking him and he tried to turn away.

"More!" came the order.

He applied himself to the task and continued to drink until there was no more. The pale man settled Methos back to the floor, but before he left him, he applied a cool touch to the right side of his throat. The caress explored the skin and rubbed firmly at a spot beneath his ear. A spot that still harbored the last vestiges of the phantom pain that remained after an injury had healed.

And then Methos remembered. This man, **this creature,** had bewitched then attacked him, biting his neck and draining his blood. Killing him. He lifted his hand and gingerly felt the site, fearful that a deep injury to his neck might have left a scar. Immortals rarely developed scars except for serious, non-fatal injuries to the neck. But luck was with him and his skin felt smooth and whole.

Feeling exposed, Methos scooted weakly over to the wall and levering himself up, braced his back against it, both for support and for the slight protection it afforded. He watched as his attacker walked slowly around the room, examining all with a speculative gaze. He picked up a small stone carving and stilled as he got a better look at it. Setting it down, he passed a crucifix, flinching slightly before he hurried on to a shuttered window. He reached out and gave the wood a brisk jiggle to test its strength.

When he got to the shelving where Methos stored his journals, the man plucked one volume at random. He stood there for a long while, the pale blue eyes scanning quickly over the pages.

Time passed and Methos shifted uncomfortably; the floor was cold and had become noticeably harder the longer he sat on it. Feeling a bit stronger, he pulled his robe closer around himself. He was always sensitive to the cold, but now he felt chilled to the bone. A shiver shook him.

"If you are cold, move closer to the fire," the man spoke without stopping his reading.

Methos considered the words and tried to think of any disadvantage to the suggestion. He was loath to leave the safety of his somewhat defensible position, but he also realized that was an illusion. His assailant had mesmerized him, and when he had attacked, it had been with unearthly speed and tremendous power. There was nowhere he could go where he'd be safe, and there was no reason to stay where he was.

Except the man that had just killed him had suggested that he move.

In the end, his dislike of the cold won out. He pushed himself to his feet, teetering slightly from the lingering weakness. Methos steadied himself by placing his hand against the wall and gathered his resolve. What he really needed to find out was what this creature was, and what it wanted of him. "Who are you?" he called out. "What are you?"

The stranger snapped the book shut and turned towards Methos. "Feeling better, are we?" His voice was low and deep, with a mellifluous quality to it that made the man sound as if he was reading poetry. He slowly walked closer.

As he moved further into the light, Methos could see the man wasn't just pale, he was luminously white. His fair hair was clipped short, old style--very old style. Eyes the color of a glacial stream stared straight into him and he tensed for another attack.

"And what, pray tell, are you?" the creature asked, staring with such intensity at Methos that he backed up a foot.

The compulsion to tell the truth was sudden and nearly irresistible. "I...I am John, a scholar," Methos lied with a slight stammer. That was the name he currently was using. He had spent the last five years at Oxford, studying and generally hiding himself amid the university. Most immortals were drawn to danger and conflict. Methos had long since discovered that places of learning were relatively quiet and dull, a veritable anathema to others of his kind. It was really quite fortunate that he enjoyed the arts of learning, studying and researching since those activities were the best for hiding. Unfortunately, Oxford had closed this year due to the plague and he had had to leave. He had returned to the empty Downs, now so different than they had once been, many lifetimes ago.

"Really." The name seemed to amuse the man and he smiled. "Well, John," LaCroix lingered over the name and raised an elegant eyebrow, "a scholar you must be to be able to write so fluently in both Latin and ancient Greek, not to mention those Egyptian and Minoan trinkets that litter your shelves."

Alarmed that his belongings were recognized and known for exactly what they were, Methos looked to the ground, anywhere but into those compelling pale eyes. How could this man know of these things? Yes, Latin and Rome were remembered but the wonders of Egypt and Crete were long forgotten. He knew this creature was not an Immortal, but what **was** he?

He heard a chuckle and he glanced up worriedly.

"Since you have asked, you may call me LaCroix, and I believe that I will be imposing upon your hospitality for quite a while."

LaCroix was quite entertained just watching the emotions flow over the expressive face. Shock, alarm, horror, more alarm. Yes, this young man could prove as interesting as Nicolas was. When the wide set eyes looked back up at him, LaCroix could also see intelligence in them. This promised to be an enjoyable diversion.

LaCroix retreated back to the table and sat down. He indicated a second chair with a flourish. "Do make yourself more comfortable."

Methos hesitated for a brief second, then complied. He pulled the chair closer to the fire and sat, perching on the very edge of the chair.

LaCroix smiled again. "Good." Looking back at the book, he indicated it with a nod. "These journals are quite old and they are written in your own hand. It appears that you are much older than you seem. All that remains to be discovered is how much older."

"I could ask the same of you."

LaCroix could tell this man wasn't going to give away anything unless he was tricked into it. A battle of wits; how delightful! He smiled. "Guess," he baited, using the Latin form of the word.

Methos paused. Seeming to come to a decision, he leaned back and studied the vampire with an appraising eye. "Let us see; tall, fair, controlling, an innate cruel streak and that certain air of superiority. A knowledge of, but not an appreciation of, ancient cultures. Let me guess: Roman, centurion or higher, born in the north of Italy or of a Gaulish slave. Shall we say around the birth of Christ, give or take a hundred years?"

The boldness of the reply surprised LaCroix. Though he was stunned by the accuracy of the guess, he let himself react more to the sting of the implied insult. "Spoken like a man who had visited fair Rome herself, under less than pleasant circumstances. Now allow me to guess; you are Greek and probably spent several long life-times keeping the books straight and the beds warm of your Roman betters." Even in the fire light, LaCroix could see a flush creep up Methos' neck and face. It made him look quite delectable. Too bad LaCroix was still full from his previous meal.

"Bastard," Methos spat. Resentment sparked off the young man. Except this young man was probably much older than LaCroix himself. Still, he must have hit close to the mark to get such a reaction; the experiences this one must have had tantalized LaCroix. "Besides, do I look Greek to you?"

"Being Greek was a state of mind. Of course I can see that you are not a native, born to those sunny isles. But if a man lives long enough anywhere, he may absorb a culture, eventually becoming more Greek than the Greek themselves."

Studying the expressive face, LaCroix suddenly felt desire again — of a carnal nature; something he hadn't wanted in centuries. Finding a beautiful victim, seducing them and then draining their life from them, heartbeat by heartbeat was more erotic and satisfying than most of the sexual interludes he had enjoyed as a mortal had been. But there had been exceptions that he remembered longingly: Greek slaves were among the best when it came down to fucking. And now, beyond all logic, here sat a man who had been a Greek slave — a thousand years after their kind had disappeared. A man young and fair, with an openness about him that was really quite appealing. A man who knew the arts of loving another man, if LaCroix were any judge. A man who reminded him somewhat, but not completely, of his Nicolas.

"The Romans did their fair bit of absorbing peoples that did not want to be absorbed. I rather imagine that was one of your duties," Methos said, with a hint of accusation.

"Everything becomes consumed by something else eventually," LaCroix said, his eyes narrowing. He stood up slowly, tiring of this talking. What they were referring to was old news a thousand years ago and there really were

more pressing matters that needed immediate attention.

Methos, alarmed by the change in tone, frantically dove off his chair and scrambled over to where his sword lie. He had barely closed his fingers over it when LaCroix was upon him.

Grabbing his right arm, LaCroix tightened his grip until the weapon fell from slackened fingers. He shoved Methos hard against the wall and leaned in, pining him. He heard the rapid flutter of the Immortal's heart, felt the strong chest gasp for breath against his own breast. The vitality of the life force was strong within his captive. LaCroix wanted him...both in bed and to feed off of. The delights of the ancient vintage that was Methos' blood called to him. He stared at the beautifully shaped lips, so fresh, so exquisitely perfused by the blood within. He leaned close for a kiss, brushing his own lips lightly over them, inhaling the heady perfume of the vital fluid so temptingly near.

He glanced up and idly wondered if those rich brown eyes could be any wider. They were frightened, yes, but there was more--maybe just the hint of a possibility? Perhaps this one could be enticed to be a willing partner. LaCroix could certainly do him no permanent harm, and he always found **willing** to be more satisfying in the long run.

But it was late. He could hear birds chirping outside, could sense the sunrise just minutes away. To serve justice, this morsel would have to wait for tonight when LaCroix's appetite was sharper and there was more time to savor him. "Later," he breathed.

He pulled Methos with him as he walked to the bed, scooping up a length of cord from where it lay coiled on a shelf.

"Lie down," he ordered. It did not take long before he had securely tied Methos down, the wrists bound separately and the cord passing under the bed. He stared down at the slender young man, who was staring back apprehensively. LaCroix decided the expression suited him and he determined he might as well give Methos something more to fret about.

"You may be tempted to escape, but I will find you if you do, Methos."

At the use of his name, Methos' expression went incredulous.

LaCroix chuckled. "Oh yes, I know your true name. I know a great deal about you." LaCroix choose not to enlighten him that that information had been passed to him through the blood. At the time, the sheer volume of information had been confusing, but then it had made more sense as he had the chance to assimilate it. He had sensed many identities but 'Methos' had been very consistent. He took a guess and knew it to be true by Methos' expression. Unfortunately, the other images would be much harder to decipher with just too many to figure out at the moment. He needed time to himself to truly understand what he had in his possession.

He walked over to where an internal door led to small storage room that promised to be darker and more secure. LaCroix smiled. "Sweet dreams," he bade, then slipped inside.

The day had dragged on slowly. Methos was comfortable enough tied to the bed, but the thought of what was in store for him made him continue to work at his bonds as he attempted to worry them apart. A beheading was the only way in which he could be permanently killed, but the idea of dying repeatedly by having one's blood drained was positively repulsive. And why did the creature have to bite the neck? Methos was very protective about his throat and hated the idea of anything sharp near it. No, despite what LaCroix had said, the best thing would be to escape.

He paused, remembering the desire that he'd seen in those compelling blue eyes. The

gentleness of the kiss had surprised him, for Romans, as a rule, had been rather single-minded about what they wanted. Powerful and in control, if they saw something they wanted, it would be theirs--sooner, rather than later. Resisting them was a poor idea, as they usually made a point to punish and torment the uncooperative. Thankfully, it was a mentality he had not had to deal with for a very long time.

During the time of Rome, he had attempted to stay away from any large Roman city, as the whole culture had an attitude that he found abhorrent. Towards the end of the time of Caesars and the Empire, the civilization had sickened and gone crazy. There had been a time he had had no choice in the matter, and been taken to Rome anyway. He had been forced to do things that horrified him, forced to see things of incomprehensible cruelty — things done for sport and in the name of entertainment. All in all, Methos had been quite relieved when Rome fell and he barely regretted the anarchy that followed.

So, as intriguing as that kiss had been, he was inclined to avoid any repeats. It was safer that way.

It was late in the afternoon when Methos felt 'the buzz' of an approaching Immortal. He gave two or three violent jerks at his bonds hoping he had caused a weakening, but they still seemed secure.

He wet his lips; it looked like he needed help and he needed it now. "LaCroix!" he called out. "We need to talk; it is important!" He listened intently, but heard nothing. He could feel the Immortal outside getting closer. He tugged again at his restraints, but they were firm. He sighed. Well, capitulation always worked wonders with Romans--they couldn't resist gloating. "LaCroix! Look, I have decided it would be...enjoyable to...to know you better. Come out and release me, and I will do anything you want. LaCroix! I beg of you, please!"

The door burst inward and a man, sword out before him, leaped into the room. Maintaining the ready stance, he quickly moved about, scanning for others. He kicked in the door to the storage room, glanced about and then returned, centering his attention on Methos. He was tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed and dressed as a fighter. His gear was well taken care of and he was heavily armed. Formidable, efficient and dangerous; this did not bode well. Helpless before him, Methos suddenly felt very ill.

He quit struggling and concentrated on talking his way out. "Ahh...my name is John and you are...?"

"Rennard d'Lyon." The accent was French, much heavier than what the Norman elite of England used. The man must travel a great deal, not bothering to attempt to blend into the population. He was probably intent on one thing only.

Rennard moved up to the bed and braced his legs apart.

"Rennard, this is not very fair now, is it? Untie me; give me a fighting chance--though I doubt you will have much to worry about."

Rennard slowly centered the sword across Methos' neck.

Methos began jerking against his bonds again. "Look, is there anything you need; money, secrets, the location of the one, true grail..."

Rennard's expression was cold, hard and definitely eager. "There can be only one," he pronounced as he raised the sword over his head. He paused, then with a mighty effort, heaved the weapon down hard.

Only to be stopped by LaCroix, his left hand alone strong enough to halt the sword in mid-strike.

Surprised by his sudden appearance, Rennard recovered enough to glare. He jerked his hand

away and stepped back, pointing the weapon at the vampire. "Do not interfere, mortal!"

LaCroix ignored the sword point and smiled. "I have been called many things throughout my life, but 'mortal' was never one of them." He stepped forward.

"Well, at least you can find comfort that you were called it once before you died!" Rennard lunged forward.

LaCroix was instantly behind him. Hissing, he trapped the sword arm with one hand and gripped the head with the other. The throat exposed, he sank his fangs into the flesh, easily restraining Rennard's struggles. When the sting of lightning crackled against his lips this time, he was ready for it. He paused, then returned to his feast after reopening the wound. Rennard grew weaker and weaker until LaCroix felt him die.

LaCroix dropped the limp body to the floor and looked over at Methos. His captive stared back with an odd mixture of horror and amazement.

"He was younger than you, much younger." LaCroix observed as he wiped his face clean.

Methos considered the words, then curiosity got the better of him. "How can you possibly tell?"

"How would you tell a fine wine?"

Methos was horrified. "By taste? You can *taste* how old someone is?!"

LaCroix reached down and picked up Rennard's sword. "Oh, I can tell a lot more than that." Rennard had only been, at the most, two hundred years old. There was one image that kept repeating and that was of swords cutting off people's heads. LaCroix wondered...

Methos looked worried. "What are you going to do with that?"

LaCroix stared at his captive. This preoccupation with the sword was crucial somehow, but he couldn't quite figure it out. Well, there was only one thing to be done. Without preamble, he raised the blade and brought it swiftly down on Rennard, severing his head with one clean stroke.

"NO!" Methos howled.

LaCroix stepped back warily, sure something was about to happen.

A white mist rose above Rennard's body. It grew tendrils that curved towards Methos, encircling him about the chest. Lightning danced along the mist and bolts shot into Methos' mouth and eyes. He screamed, his body arching up. He held that position, jerking and seizing as the raw power erupted about the room, piercing his body. The floorboards exploded and the shutters burst outwards. His arms were wrenched upwards, snapping the cords that held him down, the tattered ends dangling from each wrist as his limbs jerk to and fro. Methos screamed again, long and hoarse, the sound pulled out of his very being as the energy continued to invade his body.

LaCroix stared with alarm at the carnage happening about him. Then he felt a tingling in his stomach. Horrified, he gazed down at himself. "Dear gods," he had time to breath before he was flung bodily across the room as a bolt of energy erupted out of this mouth and off his fingertips. A white ball coalesced, spinning briefly before blasting into Methos' body, abruptly cutting off his cries.

The room fell silent. A shutter hanging by one hinge, dropped, clattering into the stillness. LaCroix picked himself up and moved cautiously over to Rennard's body. He bent down to examine it closer.

A moan drifted over from Methos, who rolled painfully onto his side, curling slightly.

LaCroix glanced over and realized that the late afternoon sun was shining through one of the windows and the bed now lay in full daylight. He stood up and moved to a protected, shadowed corner and waited.

After the pain receded, Methos rolled over onto his back and sighed. Quickenings were unique and unpredictable. He had never absorbed one while tied to a bed and he did not recommend it; he felt as if he had pulled a dozen muscles. Feeling better, he sat up and looked around. Rennard lay dead, beheaded and a threat no more. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood. He suddenly caught sight of the vampire in a dark corner of the room and stopped. LaCroix seemed undamaged; why had he not come for him? Could it be true about creatures of the night and their aversion to sunlight?

He moved slowly towards the door, keeping his eyes on LaCroix.

The vampire's eyes glittered dangerously. "Where do you think you are going?"

Methos put his hand on the door latch. "Away."

"And your promise to do anything I wished if I saved you? What of that?"

Methos grinned. "You may have trouble collecting on that if I can help it." And he was out the door.

"Run if you like, but I will be coming after you!" LaCroix shouted.

"You wouldn't be Roman if you didn't," Methos muttered under his breath. He ran to the hilltop and paused to consider his options. He had maybe an hour of sunlight left and he had left without his sword--not good. He needed somewhere protected to go. Holy Ground was his first inclination. He didn't know if it would be protection from vampires, but they were a type of immortal, too, after all. And at least he would be safe from any other roaming Immortals who were looking to collect a few heads.

The village of Avebury was nearby. In fact, it was what attracted him to this place. He had lived here long ago when they had raised the enormous stones and placed them in the intricate avenues and circles. Now, the miles of stone rows were mostly gone, buried by the order of the Benedictine priory that was nearby. The good news was that the village itself was half in the circle, and the circle of standing stones was Holy Ground. He would find shelter there.

It was as good as any place with barely an hour of daylight left.

Dusk had overtaken him an hour ago and he was only now just approaching the village. He could make out the massive stones in front of him, sticking up like ragged teeth, bathed in the uncertain light of a three quarters moon. In the last few minutes, the feeling that he was being watched, being followed, grew with each step he took. He tried to calm the anxiety he felt, but it blazed instead. Totally unnerved, he gave in and broke into a trot. Once he was running, he quickly picked up speed until he was sprinting towards what he hoped was safety, racing as fast as he ever had in his long life.

He dashed into the circle and knew it wasn't enough. He altered his path, now aiming towards some of the buildings. He caught sight of the church and put his head down for the final spurt, letting his intuition guide him. **That** was where he needed to be.

Suddenly, he was blindsided with such force that it knocked him off his feet and carried him sideways until he slammed upright against one of the stones. Stunned, he groggily looked up, knowing that it would be LaCroix who held him pinned against the rock.

He felt a hand snake up past his neck, the fingers tightening cruelly onto a great handful of his hair. Slow pressure was applied until his head was bent back at a painful angle, his mouth opening slightly, his neck totally exposed. He despaired, unable to do anything more than pant raggedly as he tried to catch his breath.

LaCroix leaned closer. He took a deep breath, inhaling the warmth and smell of Methos, his eyes fixed on his captive's lips. "I told you that I would catch you," he breathed.

The ancient Immortal could feel the hunger as the vampire crushed their mouths together. A tongue plunged deeply into him and he willed himself to stay passive against the insistent invader. The kiss ended and LaCroix let his teeth trap Methos' bottom lip, pinching him as he turned his head away.

"What is so important about this place?" LaCroix asked.

Methos swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing in sharp relief to the slender throat. The vampire's eyes glittered as they caught the movement.

"It is Holy Ground," he whispered. "Immortals can not kill each other on Holy Ground."

LaCroix chuckled. "This? Holy Ground? Only a mud-covered savage would believe so. Tell me, Methos, did you paint yourself blue and follow that whore Boadicea into battle against Rome?"

Methos eye's flashed with anger. "She was a noble queen and a brilliant general. Rome's treatment of her and her daughters was...barbaric!"

LaCroix was amused by the passion Methos still felt 1300 years after his queen was dead and buried. He couldn't resist baiting him. "She was a whore and she and her daughters were treated as such."

Methos glared and struggled briefly against him.

LaCroix smiled wickedly. "Perhaps you would care to share her punishment?"

The words were like a bucket of cold water on Methos. He knew that it was utter folly to encourage the vampire to acts of cruelty and violence. He had the distinct impression that LaCroix might find such activity inviting. He needed to change where this conversation was going and quickly.

"There's no need for that," he said, anxiously. He stood a little taller. "I said I would do anything you wanted."

"Yes, but that was before you escaped to seek refuge." LaCroix eyed him, speculating on what he might be offering. "Alright," he said, stepping back from Methos. "Let us see what you remember. Disrobe," he ordered in Latin.

Methos fixed the vampire with a long, measuring stare, then he lowered his eyes. "I hear and obey," he repeated; the ancient, expected reply, also in Latin. Sexual abuse of slaves had been forbidden by Roman law, but it was a law that had been seldom enforced.

He shrugged out of the heavy, wool robe. Unbuckling his belt, he dropped it to the ground and pealed off his tunic. Kicking the soft slippers off of his feet, he slipped his hands beneath his gown undergarment and pulled down the wool stockings that kept his legs warm. He stepped out of them and stood clothed only in the light cotton gown that also served as sleeping attire. He looked back up at LaCroix, expectantly, apprehensively.

LaCroix smiled his approval, but gave a small wave of his hand, indicating the gown. "Do not tell me you have developed a sense of modesty?" He eased closer and reaching out, slowly pulled the thin garment over Methos' head. "Ahh... Much better," he exclaimed, eyeing the naked man in front of him. The physique was one of a long-range runner--spare,

lean and sleek. Even though the body was thousands of years old, it had the glow of youthfulness. Athletic and slender, there were no scars or blemishes to mar the perfect skin. He felt himself grow hard as he admired the beauty before him.

He ran his hands up the thin arms and felt them quiver beneath his touch. It might have been from the cool night air, or perhaps it was from excitement. At least, that is what he was hoping for as he set himself the goal of seducing this young man.

He gathered him close, letting his questing fingers roam over the passive form, exploring the contours and feasting on the delicious heat of a living body. Inclining his head, he let his mouth explore the strong jaw line, pausing to nibble at an ear. He nuzzled into the soft, shoulder length brown hair, inhaling the earthy delights of oils and sweat that a living body excreted. Ahh, the odors were so *male*, that his cock jumped again in its eagerness.

Sensing unease from Methos and wanting a more impassioned response, LaCroix gave in to a passing whim and sent a mild suggestion to him--an encouragement to relax and enjoy himself, nothing more. Continuing his kisses, he reversed his path until he found the sweet mouth and pressed a deep kiss upon him. As he plundered the mouth, he slid his hands down until they gripped the firm ass. His hands flexed and tightened in time with the rhythm of his kiss and he felt Methos begin to respond to him. Tentative at first, the ancient Immortal started to return the kiss with enthusiasm.

The heat of LaCroix's passion grew intense. When he felt his urgency being returned, he leaned slightly away. Methos' eyes were dilated and vaguely wild, his lips flushed and swollen--the very picture of wantonness.

"On your knees and kiss me," LaCroix whispered. "Suck me like a hungry weanling, mon tendre agneau*.[2]

[2] My tender lamb

Methos, breathing heavily, looked down at LaCroix's groin and licked his lips. He dropped suddenly to his knees, and reaching out, pealed away the vampire's clothing until his cock was free. He could see a dark droplet of pre- cum weeping from the tip. Touching his tongue to it, he realized it tasted more like blood than semen, but he cared not.

Opening his mouth wide, he slid the organ in and avidly started tonguing and suckling, striking up a rhythm that quickly gave LaCroix weak knees.

The ancient one was better than LaCroix had guessed. All too soon he could feel the impending climax and he pushed Methos away till he lay dazed at the vampire's feet.

LaCroix stood above him, breathing heavily. "I need more..." he explained. "I need all of you." Kneeling down almost reverently next to the fevered man, he reached out and firmly guided him onto his stomach. He slipped a hand under a knee and pulled it up, opening Methos to him.

Not bothering to disrobe, he inched himself closer. Covering him, he used his hand to guide himself in. He felt the supple body beneath him tense, Methos' breaths were now confined to short gasps. Placing his hand on the Immortal's shoulder and the other on his hip, he used the holds for both leverage and coordination as he plunged deeper and deeper. As he increased the power to his thrusts, he was rewarded by a grunt as each drive jerked the writhing body up off the ground.

When his pleasure had reached a plateau, he knew it was time for the rest; to partake of the living essence of his blood--hot, thick, and spiced with lust. He threw his head back, glorying in the power and the heightened sensations as he became fully a vampire. Tightening his grip, he swooped down and plunged his teeth violently into the neck. The man beneath him cried out in pain and fear, struggling in a blind panic. LaCroix held him hard as he sucked strongly at the exquisite fluid.

With regret, he ended his feeding before the heart stilled; he was still fairly full from the meal two hours earlier. As he watched, blood pumped from the open wound, coursing down the neck and flowing across the prominate collarbone to spread across the chest. Then the ripped tissue sparkled with a blue energy and the wound healed itself. With a thrill, he remember what else was to happened and braced himself in preparation, determined to give his prize a good pounding until the quickening left LaCroix and entered the Immortal.

When the tingling started in his stomach, he rammed himself as deeply as he could and waited, holding tight to the sweaty body underneath him. He could feel the energy build, drawing lower until it exploded from his cock and burst into Methos. Both men screamed as a powerful climax torn through them. LaCroix, still not used to the intensity of the power and pleasure of the quickening energy, lay stunned in the aftermath.

Methos took a deep breath in, trying hard to collect two coherent thoughts and put them together. Never had he felt anything like that! Never had he even heard of combining sex and a quickening, which was just as well as he rather imagined there would be quite a few less Immortals around if it were common knowledge!

He shifted uncomfortably under the heavy weight that lay across him and realized with a start that LaCroix must be incapacitated. One of the reasons that Methos was incredibly long-lived, was the fact that he was very quick on the uptake, and recognized an opportunity when it came tapping gently on the door.

He quickly pulled himself out from under LaCroix, and gathered up what clothes lay between him and the lane to the church. All he needed was maybe a two minute headstart, then he'd be safe within the asylum of St. John's. He was quite sore, but he ran as quickly, barely lessening his speed as he skidded though the great door of the church. He paused long enough to shut and bar the door behind him.

Looking wildly around, he spotted the font and ran to it, heeding an intuition he had. He pushed the lid off and stared down at the Holy Water. He remembered LaCroix flinching as he saw a crucifix in his home, he remembered him scoffing at the idea that a stone circle was Holy Ground. Something told him the liquid below was his salvation. Bending down, he scooped the water up and drank it from his cupped hands. When he had had his fill, he soaked his gown in it and used it to wipe himself clean from the caked blood that was on his neck and smeared on his chest. Reaching down, he felt more blood on his thighs. He twisted about and was in the act of cleaning between his legs when the door flew open. Startled, he crouched low, keeping the font between himself and the vampire.

LaCroix stepped just inside the church, his blues eyes icy with anger as they focused in on the cowering Immortal.

"Leave this place!" LaCroix ordered.

"No." Methos was determined to stay, but he could feel a sudden compulsion to stand and walk over to the vampire. He shook his head and looked at the carvings on the Saxon font, desperate to break the psychic connection between them.

LaCroix was surprised. "What have you done?!" he demanded.

"I have drank of the holy water." He prayed that it was a response that would anger the vampire even more.

"What?!" LaCroix hissed, his fury plain. "You stupid, little man!"

"You sound displeased. Does that mean I am...inedible now?" The Immortal grew more confident when LaCroix did not physically

move against him. His gift of intuition had saved his ass again.

"For the time," he seethed. "I will find you, though. You can not hide from me."

"Well, I plan on virtually living in each church I come to; drinking holy water will be my daily ritual." Methos' expression hardened. "Get used to the knowledge that you will not be able to have me again."

"Maybe not soon, but I **will** have you again. This I promise you." And with a flourish, LaCroix turned and strode out the door.

Methos sighed with relief. He had been incredibly lucky to have gotten free of LaCroix so quickly. Now that the threat was over, he took the time to redressed himself, shaking slightly as the left-over adrenaline burned itself up in his body. He leaned against the altar, planning his movements over the next few weeks.

But as carefully as he had planned, he was delayed for two days. When the priest and a lay brother came in the following morning, they found him collapsed at the altar. Fearful at first of the plague, they carefully examined him, but he showed no symptoms of the illness that was destroying whole towns. Mystified, they carried him to the priory for the monks to care for. He lay unconscious and feverish for a day, but then recovered quickly from the strange sickness. He gave them his thanks and left.

Methos was confounded by the strange affliction. Yes, Immortals could start to fall ill, but as a disease began to effect their bodies, their amazing healing properties took over and cured them. And even more strange, after he recovered he discovered he had changed. He could now sense other Immortals at a much further distance than he had before, and he could now tell if they were orientated towards good or evil. It was an advantage that helped him immeasurably in avoiding other Immortals.

And strangely, he now felt a slightly different buzz when another type of immortal was near--the vampire. He rather imagined the changes had something to do with LaCroix, but he could not understand them.

Washington State, 1995:

Methos twisted about in LaCroix's grip until he was facing him, hating the unsecured feeling of just dangling. He slipped his arms around LaCroix's neck and even brought his legs up to encircle the vampire's waist. Committed to his course, he was damned sure he was not going to have an accidental fall on top of every other bad thing that'd happened tonight.

LaCroix's thin, pale lips curved up in a small smile. "Comfy?" His deep voice was as rich and smooth as fine malt whisky.

"I didn't want to lose you," he replied with faint sarcasm. Looking down at the passing countryside, he realized they were already well past the reach of the city lights. It made him uncomfortable. "Is this going to be a long trip?" he asked worriedly.

LaCroix leaned his head forward. Nuzzling into the sweater's neckline, he nipped at Methos's collarbone, then used his tongue to soothe the unbroken skin. He licked his way up until he had found the point at which the pulse was strongest. He sucked and nibbled at the spot.

If Methos didn't already know what this was a precursor to, he might have found it enjoyable. Instead, he shifted uncomfortably. "Shouldn't you be, you know, paying more attention to your, ah, flying?"

"But you make it so hard, mon delicieux morceau de chair*."[3]

[3] My delectable piece of flesh

Methos rolled his eyes at the double-entendre. Here he was hundreds of feet in the air, being flown to god-knows-where by a *vampire* who was about fuck his brains out--which he wasn't entirely sure he was going to survive--and his **ride** was making witty jokes. "Why the bloody hell does this have to happen to me?" he groused.

The nice thing about having Methos wrapped around him was that it left LaCroix's hands free. He slipped them under the ancient Immortal's sweater and down his pants, rubbing, squeezing and raking his nails over the tender flesh. And Methos was responding. He could feel the legs clench, the hips twist and the breath quicken. The heartbeat sped up, pumping heat and urgency throughout the slim body. It was with relief when they arrived at their destination.

He landed with a faint impact, the full moon giving an eerie but bright illumination. When Methos was slow to unwind himself, LaCroix took a few steps over to a low stone. Reaching up, he peeled off Methos' arms, and gripping his hips, wrenched him away. He forced him onto the thigh high platform. His actions were hard and rough, a promise of what was to come.

Brown eyes stared back at him in agreement, mirroring his lust. If LaCroix wanted hard and fast, Methos was ready for him.

Reaching down, LaCroix pulled the sweater off over Methos' head and set it aside. He let his hands slide down the long, slim legs until they were stopped by the encumbrance of shoes. With a hard jerk, he had wrenched the shoes off, stripping the socks away an instant later. Placing his hands on the waistband, he tore it apart, the zipper's seam giving way. Methos lifted his hips to assist in the removal of his jeans and briefs, giving a little kick when one legging refused to clear his foot.

LaCroix paused, letting his eyes feast on the vision before him. Naked and yielding, the Immortal sat before him propped up by his elbows. His knees were up and spread wide, allowing his partial arousal to take center stage. Moonlight caused the pale skin to glow, transforming the lean man in front of him into an alabaster sculpture in the ideal embodiment of long forgotten youthful Grecian beauty. It was the most perfect picture of invitation he'd seen for hundreds of years, and it made him ache for what was before him, and for what had long since past into
dust.

"Do you know where we are?"

Methos glance to the side, then did a double take. They were surrounded by a ring of capped standing stones, a too flawless duplication of Stonehenge. "Where...? What is this place?"

"A rich eccentric decided to build a war memorial on the bank of a river. As inappropriate as his choice was for that purpose, it is perfect for mine."

Methos took a closer look at the altar stone he sat on. "I hope this doesn't mean..."

LaCroix smiled. "A sacrifice? He who leaves his love alive, will enjoy a fuck another time."

A grin slipped onto Methos's face and he shook his head. "It doesn't rhyme, but I can appreciate the sentiment."

"Good. Now with that out of the way..." he reached up and pulled his own shirt off; his trousers and shoes quickly followed. The former Roman general stood naked and gleaming. His body was of a more mature type with strong shoulders and a well-developed back. He enjoyed the widening of Methos' eyes and the small lick of his lips; was it of apprehension or appreciation? Or maybe anticipation?

He let one hand stroke his erection upwards. "Do you realize that I must feed on another first before I can manage one of these for you?"

Methos closed his eyes and turned his head. Holding up one hand, he said, "Thanks for sharing, but I really would rather not know any details like that."

LaCroix placed his other hand on Methos' knee and pulled him sharply towards him. He lifted him slightly and stuffed the sweater under his ass, preparing his position. A leg on either side of him, LaCroix let his hands prowl up the thighs until he was gripping the tense, compact ass. He groaned.

"Ooh, mon vorace petit catin*."[4]

Methos had been arching and wriggling closer, drawn to the ardor in that strong, sure touch, but now he paused. "In your dreams, LaCroix," he snorted at the French phrase.

The vampire shifted, holding his hand out in front of Methos' mouth, two of his fingers extended. He raised an inquiring eyebrow.

The Immortal smiled slightly, drawing his cheeks in as he worked to gather his saliva. Opening his mouth, he enveloped the fingers, and using his tongue, coated them liberally with the slick fluid. As LaCroix withdrew his fingers, Methos added, "Besides, if you're going to talk dirty to me, do it in Latin."

"Of course. You are quite right." As he thrust a finger, then another into Methos, he told him in the crudest slang used by the conquering legions that he was about to be honored by being well and truly fucked by one favored by the gods.

Methos let his head drop back as he groaned, "Gods! Does that ever bring back memories!"

LaCroix pulled the cheeks apart and without further preamble, pushed his straining cock inwards. He was rewarded by a grunt and a tensing of the taut body before him. The semi-dry penetration caused some discomfort and made his partner squirm. LaCroix liked the squirming and settled into deeper and deeper thrusts, holding firmly onto the narrow hips. The squirms turned into twistings, and they in turn, changed into writhing. The sight of that smooth, white body dancing with passion on the rough stone, increased his craving. The vampiric change swept through him, inflaming his lust further. He needed more and he had to have it now. He strained forward towards his lover's throat.

Methos was enjoying himself and was actually beginning to hope that the encounter was going to remain a good and thorough shagging. As the rhythm grew fiercer, he sneaked a peak. LaCroix clutched at his hips as he pounded into him, his arm and abdominal muscles thick with urgency as they worked him. Then he saw the change--LaCroix's eyes blazed with fire and with his mouth open wide, the carnivorous teeth reflecting the cold moonlight.

Methos quickly squeezed his eyes shut again. It was the one thing he had wanted to avoid seeing. He did not fancy the sight of a demonic lover possessing his body. It was too much like bestiality, or some hellish Christian nightmare where Satan himself took his nightly pleasures by raping the poor souls entrapped in Perdition.

He knew what was coming and he turned his chin to the side. The impact was numbing and he could feel the warmth trickle down his neck as the vampire bit painfully into him and sucked hard at his life's blood. Still impaled, Methos could feel the cock within him jump and throb with each swallow. As the weakness of blood loss claimed him, he felt overwhelmed with the feeling of complete defilement and violation. He sensed his quickening ebbing away. Panicking, he pushed at LaCroix.

"No...NO! Too much!" he gasped. "You're taking too much!"

With an anguished cry, LaCroix jerked his head away. They solemnly regarded one another, both men panting from their exertions.

[4] My greedy little whore

The wound on his neck sizzled with power has it healed itself. LaCroix, to his relief, did not reopen the wound but made fast work licking up what blood had dripped away. The vampire's hands found his and gripping them hard, entwined their fingers together. LaCroix pulled them well above his head and held Methos pinned, his body stretched out and exposed--completely vulnerable.

LaCroix started thrusting again, long and hard. Eye to eye, he eagerly watched Methos' expression as he fucked him. And because it was sex of a kind he was more familiar with and enjoyed, the Immortal brought his legs up behind LaCroix, urging him to go deeper with each thrust.

When LaCroix captured his mouth and plunged his tongue deep inside him in a savage kiss, Methos knew it was about to begin-- the thing that would always entice him back for more, no matter how sick or perverted he considered his couplings with LaCroix to be. An orgasmic quickening.

The power that LaCroix had absorbed by drinking Methos' blood only stayed with him briefly. Like water seeking it's own level, the energy was drawn back to the only receptacle that could contain it--an Immortal. And as electricity will do, it took the path of least resistance. No sparks were seen, only two bodies convulsing together as the power shot out of LaCroix, entering Methos with blistering intensity where their tongues met. Their fingers cruelly clutched together as the energy seemed to build around the connection. But the major burst occurred where they were joined together in the deepest intimacy; electricity poured through the vampire's cock, exploding through Methos' sensitive prostate and into his bowels. The immortal lovers gripped each other tightly as the massive orgasm seized them both.

The intensity of the pleasure/pain was too much for Methos. Already weak from blood loss, he passed out.

LaCroix collapsed heavily as the last of the quickening left him. As he struggled to bring his breathing under control, he became more aware of the spark of life that flared persistently beneath him. He could feel a rapid pounding as the heart desperately tried to circulate what little blood was left. The beating so close to where his own used to throb, caused a flash of poignancy for the loss of what he once was. Never one much for regrets, he rejected the emotion, but nonetheless, gave a simple mortal-type kiss to the unconscious man beneath him, allowing his tongue to delve one last time within the sweet, young mouth.

Aware of the late hour, he reluctantly levered himself up off the pliant body, loathe to end the delightful joining. His body urged him to dive back and embrace the Immortal again, repeating the heady ecstasy until the morning sun vaporized him in the act of possessing this man again. With a rueful grin, he acknowledged that a man could become obsessed with sex like this.

LaCroix extracted himself from the unconscious man and stood up. As he had expected, the encounter was even better than the one six hundred years ago had been. He stared fondly at the relaxed form spread-eagle on the altar stone, and knew he would take up the brushes and oils again to recreate such an inviting scene. Never had anyone worn that freshly debauched look with such beauty and innocence. Methos was priceless in more ways than one.

He inspected himself and saw with distaste that, as usual, sex with the living was much messier than with the undead. Picking up Methos' briefs, he used them to wipe himself clean. As an afterthought, he folded them and used the clean side to sop up the creamy semen that was liberally smeared across the flat stomach before him. "No need to ask if it was as good for you as it was for me," he purred as he tossed the soiled cloth away.

As he pulled on his clothes, he reviewed some of the images he had absorbed through the exquisitely flavored blood. Methos had led a relatively quiet life since their last meeting, but there was one bright spot in the world of gray — the tall, dark man that had tried to rescue Methos in the alley. LaCroix knew Duncan was his name and where he lived. He also knew that they had only recently become lovers, and that both Immortals would protect unto death the life of the other.

LaCroix smiled. He could think of no safer place to store his treasure than with this man. It would also make it easier to find Methos in the future and to manipulate him into a willing tryst, for LaCroix had no intention of giving up these mind-blowing assignations. Though he knew they would become addicting if repeated too often and any dependency was a weakness, he felt a session once or twice a year would be tolerable. Maybe he would choose this site again in remembrance of their first coupling so many centuries before in that ancient stone circle.

So, with the night more than half over and LaCroix still hundreds of miles from the safety of his chosen lair, he decided to wrap things up. Methos was slow to recover; he probably wouldn't until he got something to drink. The vampire made a mental note to himself to bring some liquid along next time.

He quickly redressed the slack body, but when confronted by the shoes, he decided to leave them there with the briefs; the dawn was too close to be bothering with things like that. He hefted Methos over one shoulder and soared into the air.

A few hours later, he landed on top of the dojo. He could feel MacLeod awake below him, fretting about his friend. Laying his burden down, he checked Methos one more time. Blood loss and exposure to the chill autumn air was all that was keeping him incapacitated. Standing, he retreated into a dark shadow and let his thoughts find the Immortal below.

"Come," he whisper, willing him closer. He waited.

A minute later, MacLeod stealthily crept out onto the roof, his sword at the ready. Catching sight of Methos sprawled out, he quickly moved closer, maintaining his alertness. He knelt down and placing his hand on his shoulder, gave it a shake.

"Methos!" he said urgently.

LaCroix stepped out into view. "How touching."

The sword zeroed in on LaCroix's heart as the Highlander crouched defensively over his vulnerable lover. "What hae yew don ta him?!"

LaCroix smiled wickedly. "I'll let our sleeping friend tell you if he so desires. If you want him..." he paused, boldly eyeing the athletic body, leaving no doubt as to his meaning, "'recovered,' give him liquids and a warm bath, though I can attest to the delights he offers 'as is.'"

MacLeod's outrage was so great it left him momentarily stunned.

And in the space of those few seconds, LaCroix was gone. There was no time to torment this impressive figure further. He needed to check on Natalie to make sure she had come to no harm. It was true that LaCroix was many things, but he was also protective of his children, and this was the first time he had left her on her own.

As he raced away, LaCroix idly wondered what it would be like to bed the Highlander. He considered the broad, hearty body and decided not. If he was going to partake the fine elixir of a different type of immortality, he would prefer the slim, graceful build of his chosen--a man with whom it was easy to slip back into his time of mortalness and live once again the days of mighty Rome. A man with whom, as he drank his blood, he could even see back to a time before his own birth, when the pyramids were

not yet even dreamed of. To a time so distant, man had not yet even conceived of the concept of writing. In fact, LaCroix had the distinct impression that there was something even further back, something long buried and perhaps even forgotten by Methos himself.

Well, that was a path he would explore at some future date. He smiled at the anticipation he felt. It was good to have something to look forward to, something to quicken the blood.

Duncan scooped up the ancient Immortal and carefully carried him down the stairs into his quarters. He laid Methos on the bed and turned up the light, his anger turning to worry; Immortals never stayed out for this length of time. Noticing the paler than usual skin, he rested his hand over Methos'. It was icy, but he was reassured as he felt a slight squeeze in response. Deciding to follow the instructions given to him, he hastened to the kitchen for some juice. With a little care, he managed to support Methos while pouring the fluid into him, taking care not to give him too much, or too fast.

"Ohh..." Methos groaned. "Gods...I feel terrible."

"If you're complaining you must be doing better. Let's get you into a nice hot bath." As he prepared to help Methos off with his clothes, he noticed the sweater was on inside out and the fly of the jeans was torn to pieces. Not to mention that the underwear he had donned this morning was missing completely, and he was barefooted.

"Oh, laddie. What has happened to yew?" MacLeod's accent, as always, became thicker when he was upset. He was distressed by the disheveled and abused look to his love.

"It's a long story, MacLeod," he said wearily. "Later."

"Well, I'll drawn you a bath then."

He shifted to move away, but Methos caught his arm to stay him.

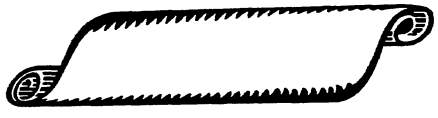
"That can wait. What I really need now is for you to hold me. Hold me tight," he repeated, suddenly needy for Duncan's presence--to be reassured that the strong, brave Highlander was there and the decadent spectre that was LaCroix was not.

Duncan smiled fondly. "You're half frozen--the bath'll be good for you," he coaxed.

Methos tugged him closer. "This will be better and besides, I'll survive. I always do," he added, his voice bleak and worn.

Duncan leaned over and gathered him close, needing to give the comfort his lover so obviously required. He gave him a gentle kiss, and hugged him tighter, settling in for as long as Methos needed.

"See that you do," the Highlander murmured.



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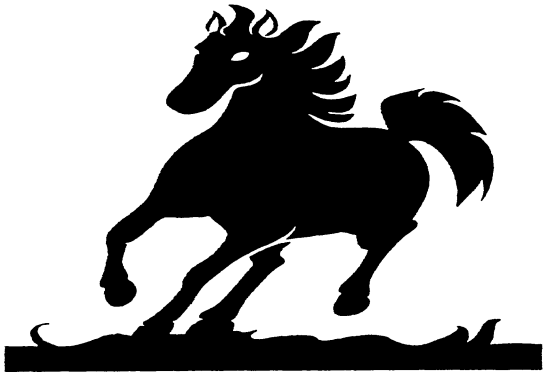

by Theresa Kyle

Voices. He heard voices. Voices of a man and a woman - both disturbingly familiar.

"Oh, the joy! The joy! To finally have the perfect revenge on James West! This is just too delicious to be borne." The man's voice.

"Come on, this is a lot of bother for nothing. Why don't we just kill him? He deserves it after what he did to you." The woman's voice - a sweet, musical sound.

"Because, my sweet Lauralee, killing him would be too easy." The man's voice was tinged with impatience. "Death means nothing to men like James West. No, the best revenge is something **worse** than death. Something so excruciating that he'll long for death."

"What do you plan on doing?"

"A maniacal laugh. Then: "I plan, my dear Lauralee, on destroying what James West loves the most. And you're going to help me."

The voices seemed to fade away, and then, despite his efforts to remain awake, he sunk back into the murky depths of unconsciousness.

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Insane giggling - a grating sound - spurred Jim to wakefulness. The little man standing over him, seeing his eyes were open, purred: "Ah, Mr. West! So kind of you to join me."

It was the owner of the voice Jim had heard earlier, a man he immediately recognized. "Dr. Loveless," he said, annoyed to hear his voice come out a weak, husky croak.

Dr. Loveless nodded modestly, as if accepting a compliment. "It's been a long time, Mr. West," he said. "Far too long."

Jim looked around and saw he was in some kind of basement, no windows, stone floor and walls, no furniture except for the table he was lying on. He attempted to rise, and discovered that both his feet and hands were chained with huge iron links and padlocks to the table.

"Oh, don't worry, you're quite secure," Dr. Loveless said. "Lauralee made sure of that. She's such a sweet girl."

"I thought you were in prison," Jim said.

"Prison? Oh, not at all, my dear Mr. West. Although it was kind of you to worry so. Didn't you know that no bars could hold me?"

I should have, Jim thought wryly. He tried to remember how he'd gotten there. He remembered himself and Artie playing some pool in a saloon, and then a lovely if slightly disreputable-looking woman wooing him to her carriage on the premise of offering her favors. He remembered kissing her and then....nothing. She, or someone in league with her, must have knocked him out and brought him here - wherever "here" was.

"What do you want with me, Loveless?" he asked. "Artie and I aren't after you; we're on vacation. I didn't even know you'd escaped from jail."

Dr. Loveless smiled condescendingly. "I know. Your Secret Service is so abysmally slow in finding out anything, Mr. West. But...as to why I kidnapped you...." His smile widened. "Let's just say that my patience with you has finally become exhausted.

Jim remembered the conversation he'd overheard earlier. "You kidnapped me for revenge?"

Loveless shrugged his small shoulders. "Well, yes, to be blunt."

Jim remembered something else from the conversation he'd overheard - that Loveless intended to destroy what he "loved the most". But what could he have been talking about? He had no wife, no family still living - no one except....

Artie. Oh, God, Did Loveless plann to do something to Artie? With an effort Jim kept his face expressionless. "Have anything specific in mind?" he asked.

"Yes, I do, as a matter of fact." Loveless leaned closer, close enough for Jim to look right into the bright, colorless eyes. "And you'll have to admit," he added confidentially, "that my little plan of revenge is positively brilliant, even for me. You know what I intend to do, Mr. West? Guess."

Jim knew that Dr. Loveless loved to be prodded about his mad plots, but that the best way to get him to talk was to pretend complete lack of interest. He affected a yawn. "Sorry. I'm not much of a guesser."

Dr. Loveless looked a little put out. "I must say that's very unsportsmanlike of you, Mr. West; but I won't quibble. Very well, I'll tell you what I intend to do. You want to know what annoys me the most about you, Mr. West? Of course, you have many very aggravating qualities, but I'll tell you the worst one. Your ladies. All your ladies - scores of them, hundreds, perhaps! And all of them..." The little man's face twisted with disgust - "...all of them so willing to grovel and crawl at your feet for one word of affection, one kiss, one tender touch! Not that I'm jealous, of course," he added hastily. "It's just a...a moral outrage. And I think it's time your corruption of innocent virgins came to an end."

Jim smiled. "Let me get this straight. You intend to do away with all the women in the world? Or just all the virgins?"

Loveless clucked his tongue. "Oh, nothing so all-encompassing as that, Mr. West," he said. "I fear that would put a strain on even my talents. However, for you my plan will do something just as good. Would you like to know what it is?"

Jim's shoulders and legs were getting cramped. He tried to stretch a little, but the chains didn't allow for much movement. "Not particularly," he said.

Dr. Loveless scowled. "That's just like you, Mr. West. No scientific curiosity whatsoever. It would serve you right if I just left you here, chained up, until you starved to death."

Jim let out a sigh. "All right," he said, keeping his voice as bored as before, "why don't you tell me."

Loveless, still petulant, didn't look too eager to comply, but finally, his vanity winning out, he grunted in acquiescence. "Very well, even though you don't deserve it. Tell me, Mr. West - have you ever practiced acts of sexual perversion?"

Jim stared at the doctor. Despite all the years he'd matched wits with Loveless and how well he'd come to know the little man, he never would have expected a question like that from him. "What?" he said blankly.

"Sexual perversion, Mr. West." Loveless sounded as placid as if he were talking about the weather. "Have you ever known a man - in the Biblical sense - the way you know a woman? You do know, don't you, that there are some men in the world who don't desire women at all. That they, in fact, desire other men. In France they are called *maricon.* I'm asking if you've ever indulged in such practices. After all, you do so enjoy the pleasures of the flesh."

Involuntarily, Jim shook his head.

Loveless rubbed his hands together gleefully. "Ah, good," he said approvingly. "That will make this little experiment much more interesting."

"What exactly did you have in mind?" Jim asked, liking not at all the dark thoughts that were assailing him.

"You're very demanding for someone who's bound and helpless, Mr. West. You're a very arrogant person, you know that? But very well, I'll tell you." The little man's eyes sparkled with pleasure - the pleasure he always had when he had a chance to show off his knowledge. "Not many people know this, Mr. West, but sexual perversion is caused not by depravity, not by conditioning, but by physical chemistry. I'm not talking about sexual behavior - although it includes that too, of course - but actual sexual feelings, desires if you will. Did you know that there are animals that practice sexual perversion? Proof that such behavior is not a choice, not what people call a 'sin' , but just a matter of body chemistry. I made quite a study of this while I was in prison - which as you may or may not know, is a very good place for studying sexual perversion - doing chemical analysis of the blood of sexual perverts as opposed to so-called 'normal' individuals. And I found that the body chemistry of sexual perverts has an unknown component that normal individuals don't have."

"Fascinating," Jim said.

"Yes, isn't it?" Loveless agreed, ignoring Jim's sarcasm. And the most fascinating part, Mr. West, is that, with my incomparable genius, I found a way to isolate this chemical and synthesize it into a powder." He took a paper packet out of his waistcoat and waved it impressively in front of Jim. "This powder," he said importantly, "will change one's sexual feelings, or desires - perhaps you could call it sexual orientation - completely. And permanently." He grandly shook out some of the powder into a palm and displayed it.

"It looks like sugar to me," Jim said.

Dr. Loveless looked impatient. "Ah, but appearances can be deceiving, my dear Mr. West. This is not sugar but a powerful powder which has, as I said, the ability to change a normal man into a sexual pervert - almost instantaneously. And while you were unconscious, Mr. West, I gave you a dose of this powder." He giggled. "Delicious, isn't it? Right now that lovely little powder is doing its work, changing your chemical makeup to that of a sexual pervert. In a few hours, Mr. West - perhaps sooner - you will no longer be interested in women." He giggled again, obviously delighted with himself. "Just think, Mr. West - all the women in the world will still be charmed by you, but you won't feel anything for them! Not a thing! You have to admit that this revenge is the most appropriate anyone could possibly think up for you."

Jim couldn't believe this. Loveless had come up with some incredible schemes in his time, but this one was just *too* incredible. "Come on, Loveless," he scoffed. "You don't expect me to believe this stuff, do you? There's not a chemical in the world, I don't care what it is, that could make me stop liking women."

Dr. Loveless stopped giggling, his face darkening as it always did when people refused to take him seriously. He grabbed Jim's hair and yanked his head back to glare into his eyes. "We'll see what you believe, Mr. West, after my powder does its work," he said coldly. Then, releasing Jim from his grasp, he looked at his pocket watch. "Ah - time for me to go, I see. Much as I would love to stay and watch you suffer when you find yourself unable to make love to any of your women anymore, I'm afraid that's impossible, since I fear if I were around while you were unfettered you would take unfair advantage of me and put me back in jail. Therefore, I'm going to leave now. My sweet Lauralee will come in and release you as soon as I've had time to escape. Your horse is right outside - we're in a deserted farmhouse about ten miles from town - and your abominable Mr. Gordon and his train aren't too far from here. So you should be able to find your way home with little difficulty."

"Just like that? You're going to let me go?"

Dr. Loveless shook his head. "My dear Mr. West. Haven't you ever heard the poem, 'Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage'? Richard Lovelace, seventeenth century. The bars I have put around you will be far more rigid and unyielding than any bars of a prison could ever be - and it's for life, my dear Mr. West. For life. How long will you be able to work in the Secret Service, when they find out what you are? How eager will your dear friend Artemus Gordon be to work with you, when he finds out what you are? And how will you feel when you realize that you no longer have any desire for women, no matter how comely they are - that, in fact, your only desire is for men, men who would shoot you in an instant if they knew of your feelings? Just think - the only gratification you will ever get, from his moment on until the end of your life, will be from perverts. I'm sure that eventually you'll wish that I had killed you." He pouted. "Darn it, you're going to suffer so, Mr. West, and I'm not going to be around to see it! But alas, life is not always what we wish, is it? He sighed regretfully. "Good-bye, Mr. West."

He waddled out, leaving Jim alone.

&

The moment Dr. Loveless left Jim managed to get his lockpick from the sleeve of his jacket and started to work on his manacled hands. It was slow work, with both of his hands bound, and he could feel perspiration run down his face and down his back between his shoulder blades as he struggled to turn the tumblers. Finally, however, he managed it, and the relief he felt when the chains fell from his wrists was almost palpable. Then he quickly sat up to pick the lock that was holding the chains to his feet.

After he rose from the table he felt hopefully for his gun, but, as he'd expected, it was gone. He smiled wryly; he supposed it'd be too much to hope that Loveless was insane enough to forget to disarm him - even though, as evidenced by the words he had just spoken, the little man's mind was obviously in need of major repairs.

Just then he heard a door open and a woman came down the steps, a dark-haired woman wearing an attractive green gown and holding a padlock key. Jim recognized her as the woman who had lured him into her carriage with such delicious promises. She looked startled to see him unchained, and automatically backed up a step. "Mr. West? How'd you escape?" she stammered.

Jim shrugged modestly. "Easy when you know how. Lauralee, I presume? Forgive me for addressing you with such formality, but Dr. Loveless didn't tell me your last name and we weren't formally introduced last night."

"Yes, I'm Lauralee. Miguelito told me to let you go. " She looked at the table, and the unlocked padlocks, with a frown. "But I guess it was unnecessary."

"But I appreciate the thought. "Where's Loveless now?"

"He left."

"Where?"

Lauralee shook her head. "Come, Mr. West. You really don't think he would tell me, do you? Or that I would tell you, even if I knew?"

Jim realized that more persuasive methods were called for. With a smile he moved his arms around Lauralee and kissed her - thoroughly. Her lips were willing and supple under his, and he felt, against his face, her breath quicken with excitement from the caress.

Unfortunately, the kiss was not having the same effect on him. He felt amazingly calm, almost detached - not at all the way he usually felt when kissing a beautiful woman. In fact...

In fact, kissing her was almost...distasteful.

He released her, feeling - for the first time - a thread of fear. Fear that Dr. Loveless's ranting hadn't been all talk.

No. Don't think that. I'm tired, that's all. Out of shape from being unconscious all that time.

"That was nice," Lauralee murmured. "But, unfortunately, I still don't know where Dr. Loveless is. Your horse is right out front, however. Why don't you leave? You're not hurt, after all, and Miguelito didn't do anything that's against the law, did he?"

"He's guilty of kidnapping. So are you, as an accomplice."

"Wonderful," she said sarcastically. "Why don't you arrest me?"

"That might not be a bad idea." Jim's voice came out sharper than it usually did when he was addressing the fair sex. "Maybe a few hours in a cell would refresh your memory."

"I don't think so." Lauralee reached inside a hidden pocket of her gown, drew out a derringer. It was a little two-shot with a pearl handle, often called lady's pistol, but Jim knew from experience how deadly they could be. "Now I suggest you get out of here."

Jim was amused in spite of himself. "You're very persuasive," he said. "Put so convincingly, I suppose it would be rude to say no."

He walked out.

&

Loveless had been, for once, telling the truth, Jim discovered after reaching the top of the basement

stairs - he was in a deserted farmhouse, and his horse was tied up right in front. The horse had even been fed, watered, and rubbed down. Dr. Loveless had obviously wanted Jim to be able to leave without delay.

"*But why?* Jim wondered as he mounted his horse and started along the trail that he hoped would lead him back to town. Why would Loveless let him go so easily, without killing him or even torturing him a little?

As he rode he noticed night was coming on. That meant he'd been unconscious for about twenty-four hours. A whole day lost. Odd, he thought, that he didn't feel worse; a head injury that was serious enough to make him unconscious all that time should've been giving him a splitting headache right about now. Unless Loveless - or his lady friend Lauralee - had knocked him out with some kind of drug instead. But if he'd been drugged for twenty-four hours, he'd still feel pretty lousy, wouldn't he?

And yet, except for feeling a little cramped from being chained up on that table, he didn't feel bad at all.

Maybe Loveless has developed some new kind of knock-out potion, with no side effects. The thought amused him only momentarily, however, because that made him think of some of Dr. Loveless' other inventions - including the drug that he'd once put into Jim's shaving water that had given Jim an hallucination that he'd killed Artie.

Dr. Loveless was a madman. But the hell of it was, he **was** a genius. And his damned inventions did work more often than not.

Was it possible that what he'd said was true, no matter how incredible it sounded? That he'd given Jim a powder, a powder that would make him no longer want women? Want men instead? Of course, it was incredulous, unbelievable, but Loveless had developed potions in the past that had been equally unbelievable - and yet they'd worked.

Troubled, Jim thought back to a friend he'd had at West Point. David, his name had been. There had been rumors that David liked to indulge in various sexual practices with men, but Jim had always ignored the talk since David had been as aggressive, as masculine, as good at sports, as any of the other cadets. But later David had confessed to Jim that the rumors were true. Jim had not been repulsed by this revelation, and he and David had stayed good friends, but he had always found it hard to believe that a man, any man, could prefer men to women.

But such men did exist. And if Loveless had been right - that he'd figured out a way to duplicate the condition, chemically...

Jim remembered his complete indifference to Lauralee when they'd kissed. She had obviously enjoyed the kiss, but he had not. There had been no reaction in him whatsoever - physical or emotional. He might as well have kissed a wall.

What if Loveless' potion was all he'd claimed? What if he stopped desiring women and started desiring men, like David had? Would it mean the end of his career?

Then Jim felt his heart stop as he thought of Artie. If he became...that way...how long could he hide it from Artie? Oddly, he didn't particularly care what others thought, but to have his partner know he was like that... What would he say? Would he be disgusted, repulsed? Would he stop being Jim's friend? Jim couldn't imagine that ever happening, no matter what, but still...

He rode the rest of the way to the train wearing a worried frown.

&

Artie was at the telegraph when Jim walked into their private car. He jumped up immediately. "Jim! thank God!" The relief on his face was obvious.

"Hi, Artie."

"I was just about to wire the local sheriff's office about you. What the hell happened?" he demanded. "I know you enjoy the company of ladies, but you've been gone for almost twenty-four hours. Are you okay?"

Jim nodded. "Fine." As he looked at his friend, he abruptly realized that Artie, probably due to the lateness of the hour, was wearing only a dressing gown - a dressing gown that was carelessly tied and therefore gaped in the front, enough to show an expanse of broad, muscular, hair chest. It came to Jim, unwillingly, that Artemus Gordon was a very attractive man.

It also came to him that he had never noticed that before.

Abruptly tired, he sank down on the couch, unwilling, unable to believe what was happening to him.

"Want some coffee?" Artie offered. "And something to eat?"

"Sounds good," Jim admitted. "I missed dinner. And breakfast and lunch too."

Within minutes Artie brought him a mug of hot coffee, a few slices of fresh bread and butter, and some cold ham. Jim dug in, grateful both for the nourishment and for the respite from his troubled thoughts.

Artie, watching him eat, ventured mildly: "Y'know, Jim, I know how you are when you get captivated by one of your ladies, but I wish you'd sent me some kind of word you were going to be gone so long."

"I'm sorry," Jim said, tearing off a piece of bread and buttering it liberally. "I would have if I could have, but unfortunately Dr. Loveless wouldn't allow it."

Artie's ruddy face went pale. "Loveless? You're kidding. You met up with him again?"

"Him and another one of his pretty accomplices. Her name's Lauralee. She was the one who lured me into her carriage and, I presume, knocked me out. When I woke up, I was chained to a table and Loveless was standing over me, giggling that giggle of his."

"How'd you escape?"

Jim looked away, wishing fervently that Artie was fully dressed. Ruggedly handsome, with thick curly hair, broad chest, narrow hips, muscular physique - his partner was so overwhelmingly male. No wonder so many women were charmed by him. "I didn't escape," he said. "He let me go. Or rather, he left and his lovely accomplice let me go - on Loveless' orders, supposedly. Unfortunately, she had a gun, so I couldn't bring her back with me for questioning."

Artie whistled softly. "Sounds like Loveless is going off the deep end. Going to all that trouble to kidnap you and then just letting you go? Maybe we're getting lucky, Jim - maybe he's finally gone completely batty."

"Ah...well...I didn't quite mention everything, Artie," Jim said uncomfortably. "He claimed - when he had me chained up - that he gave me a drug. While I was still unconscious. Another one of his favorite inventions."

Artie's eyes narrowed with concern. "What kind of drug?"

"One that permanently lessens someone's desire for women. Or so he said."

Artie snorted. "You mean like a reverse aphrodisiac? That's crazy. I mean, something like saltpeter, maybe, or a depressant like opium, might reduce desire for a limited amount of time - but forever? No drug could do that. He just made that up to give you a scare."

Jim still avoided Artie's eyes, not wanting to inform his partner that the little doctor's boasts had proven to be all too true. "Maybe," he said evasively. "But the point is, Loveless has escaped from jail. And we've got to find him before he has time to implement another one of his mad schemes."

Artie nodded. "I agree. Any clue as to where Loveless escaped to?"

"No, no clue. I didn't see any tracks around the house, but of course, Loveless is too smart to leave any."

"Too bad Lauralee pulled a gun on you. If she hadn't you might've brought her back here with you and maybe you could've charmed her into telling us where he'd gone."

Jim shook his head. "She told me she didn't know where Loveless was, and I had the feeling she was telling the truth. I also had the feeling that she wasn't one of his - ah, conquests. She was much too smart and independent."

Artie smiled a little. "You're probably right. Your judgment about women has always been close to a hundred percent." Seeing Jim had finished the makeshift meal, he stood up. "Well, guess our vacation's over. I should've known it was too good to last. It's late, so how about if we both get some sleep right now. We can wire Richmond for instructions first thing in the morning."

Jim reluctantly nodded, and stood up as well. "All right," he said.

Artie gave him a look. Obviously he knew something was wrong with his partner - even if he didn't know what. "Hey, I'm sorry I bawled you out earlier," he ventured. "It's just that - y'know. I was worried about you."

"It's...all right." Jim, as he looked into his partner's eyes, felt a warmth wash over him, and - incredibly, impossibly - the beginnings of an erection, pressing against the fabric of the tight pants he was wearing.

From just standing close to Artie.

Oh, God...it really is true. Everything Loveless said...

"Jim? You okay?"

"Fine," Jim said hoarsely. He cleared his throat. "Ah, Artie...."

"What?" Artie's eyes were gentle, and somehow innocent. Jim, still staring into them, found himself unable to say whatever he'd planned on saying.

"Ah...I just wanted to say I'm sorry I worried you," he said lamely. "By...disappearing."

Artie grinned. "Hey, what else are partners for, but to worry about you?" he said lightly, then he sobered. "Are you sure you're all right, Jim? You look...strange."

I feel strange. Cutting off his thoughts, Jim moved toward the door, feeling as if he would explode if he had to look into those dark eyes one more second. "I'm fine," he said shortly. "I'll see you...in the morning." Quickly, he walked to his room.

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An hour later he was still wide awake. Lying there staring into the dark, he was uncomfortably aware that his penis, which had been disturbingly inert while he'd kissed Lauralee, was now rigid and aching. Probably, he admitted to himself uncomfortably, because he couldn't stop thinking that just a few steps away, Artie was lying in bed - probably naked under the covers since he usually slept that way in the summertime.

"Shit," he muttered. Pulling himself up to a sitting position, he ran a hand through his hair, rumpling it further, as thoughts, unbidden, ran through his mind.

Artie's arms around him, holding him close. That strong, masculine body pressing against him. Artie's dark eyes smiling into his. Kissing those hard, male lips....

But what would Artemus Gordon - one of the most moral men he'd ever known - think of his thoughts? What would he do if he knew his trusted friend, Jim West, had become - in Loveless' words - a sexual pervert? That his trusted friend was lying here just a short distance away and dreaming about him - dreaming about moving his arms around him, kissing him, touching him.

"Dammit!" he exploded, and climbed out of bed. Ignoring the painful rigidity of his erection, he pulled on his dressing gown and walked into the main room. There was only one thing that was going to help him get to sleep that night - and that was whisky. Lots of it. He didn't particularly like the idea of getting drunk when Dr. Loveless was in the vicinity, but this was an emergency.

There was a decanter of whisky on the table. Jim took a glass, poured himself a shot, and tossed it down neat.

"Jim, what's wrong?"

Jim looked up and saw Artie had walked into the room, a worried frown on his face as he tied his dressing gown. He looked so incredibly desirable, standing there with his sleepy eyes and tousled hair, that Jim could do nothing but stare at him and feel weak with longing.

"Jim, did you hear me?" Artie demanded sharply. "I asked you what's wrong. I've been listening to you tossing and turning for an hour."

"Nothing's wrong."

"Sure," Artie said. "That's why you look like someone who's just lost their best friend."

Or someone who's about to, anyway, Jim thought miserably. He poured himself a second shot.

Artie moved closer. "Come on, Jim, talk to me. We've always been able to talk before. What happened? Did Loveless - is there something about your meeting with him you're not telling me?"

Jim opened his mouth, but the denial seemed to die on his lips. He stared down at the shot glass. He couldn't lie to the man who meant more to him than anyone else. But he couldn't tell the truth either, could he?

"Jim, whatever's wrong, believe me, we can handle it," Artie said, his voice pleading now. "But I can't help you if you won't talk about it." He laid a hand on Jim's arm.

The friendly touch burned Jim like a brand. Suddenly he couldn't bear it any longer. With an almost-sob he moved his arms around Artie's shoulders, pulled his partner against him and kissed him.

Artie's mouth was all he had thought it would be. More. Firm, dry, and so sweet-tasting that Jim felt as if all his breath was being sucked from his body. Hungrily, he kissed his friend harder - his penis, already turgid, swelling up tighter against the taut confines of his robe. It felt so good.

Then, gradually, it seeped into Jim's passion-fogged brain that even though Artie wasn't pushing him away, he wasn't exactly responding either. This realization made Jim somehow force himself to pull out of the embrace. Leaning against the mantle, he fought to control himself, panting, heart pounding, on the verge of tears of disgust and self-condemnation.

Artie said nothing. He waited.

Finally, Jim forced himself to look at the older agent again, and surprised, saw that his friend still looked worried, but not at all disgusted.

"Okay," Artie said quietly. "Now tell me what the hell's going on."

Is that all he can say? Jim stared at his partner, wordless.

"Jim? Did you hear me? Talk to me."

He took several deep breaths. Finally he managed: "You're not going to believe this..."

"Where Loveless is concerned, I'd believe anything. What?"

"Dr. Loveless. That drug he told me he gave me..." Jim let out another breath. His heart was still thumping and his lips were still burning from Artie's kiss, but at least the whiskey was, belatedly, taking away some of the tension from his body. "I didn't tell you everything that it was supposed to do. It's true that it was supposed to take away my desire for women, but Loveless said it would also give me a desire for...men." He looked away once more, and swallowed heavily. "And it must be the damned thing works, because...I now feel that way about you."

Artie said nothing for a second or two. Then he said, "You mean - you feel about me the way you usually feel about women?"

Jim nodded miserably. "And I don't have any desire left for women either," he choked out. "That woman, Lauralee, that Loveless left behind to guard me - I kissed her and felt absolutely nothing."

"Maybe she just wasn't your type."

"Dammit, Artie!" Jim blazed at him. "Of course she was my type. She was a woman, wasn't she? And she attracted me enough when I met her at the saloon - enough to go to her carriage anyway. But after he gave me that damned drug - damn it don't you know what I'm saying?"

"Yes, I do.." Artie's voice was even quieter now.

"Well? Aren't you shocked?" Jim demanded, almost accusingly.

Artie shook his head. "Surprised, maybe. But shocked, no." His lips quirked in an amused smile. "I'm not an innocent, my dear James. Not in any way, shape, or form. Remember, I worked in the theater for many years."

Jim, blinked, stunned by a sudden thought which had never occurred to him before. Artie's smile went a little wry.

"Yep," he said, answering Jim's unspoken question. "That's where they hang out, you know - in the performing arts. And, once or twice, when a woman has been fair and cold, I've found pleasure with men."

Jim, still stunned, couldn't think of a thing to say.

"Not lately," Artie added. "Not for many years, but I'm just telling you - like I said, I'm not as innocent as you think. And if it turns out that you really are - that way - and that it's permanent, well...I know it's not a very happy situation for you, but it's not the end

of the world either. We can find ways to deal with it."

"What do you mean?" Jim asked, made courageous by the whisky, and by a sudden hope that was rising in his chest.

"I mean that you'll always have me," Artie said simply. "Anytime, anywhere you need someone - I'll be there."

"Artie..." Almost overwhelmed by an irresistible compulsion, Jim reached out and grabbed his partner's hand, holding it tightly in his. He was almost afraid to ask, but he forced himself to get the words out. "Does this mean we can be together? Tonight?" He heard the eagerness in his voice, and didn't try to disguise it.

Artie's free hand caressed Jim's face, stroking the whisker-rough cheek as if it were the finest silk.

"Let's go," he said.

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They walked, as if by mutual consent, into Artie's room. Not yet touching, Jim nonetheless felt as breathless and excited as if they were, as if he were feeling every hard muscle, every angle of his friend's strong, all-male body.

Artie struck a Lucifer and lit the lamp. Jim, watching him, said, "You really want to do that?" Somehow, he's assumed that Artie would rather make love in the dark.

Artie gave him a shy look. "Yes, I do," he said. "I want to see you."

Jim smiled, a little tremulously. "That's a wish I'll be happy to grant," he said huskily, and untying his robe, dropped it to the floor. Artie's eyes widened as they caressed Jim's naked body.

"Oh, God, Jim..." His voice was awed. "You're...you're incredible."

"You've seen me naked before." Jim felt embarrassed by the praise.

"Not like this." Artie walked up to him, stroked his chest; then moved his hand down to Jim's hard erection, now straining up against his flat belly. He took him into his hand, caressing, and Jim gasped at the touch, closing his eyes at the exquisite feeling.

He'd had women touch him this way - some of them eagerly, some timidly. But no one's touch had ever made him feel like this.

"Artie..." His voice was a whisper; he felt, once again, on the verge of tears. But not from humiliation this time. From happiness.

"Let's lie down," Artie whispered.

Jim nodded, quickly moving on top of the covers. Artie watched him, then moved a hand up to untie his own robe, pulling it off.

"Artie," Jim breathed again, as his friend's nudity was revealed. Hard, broad, thick with black hair, Artie's body was the epitome of masculine beauty. Jim couldn't resist reaching out, brushing a hand against Artie's thigh, relishing the feel of firm muscle.

How could I have ever desired women before, with Artie right here? He's everything I could ever want...

Jim's hand moved up Artie's thigh, to his penis - thicker and shorter than his own, with large heavy balls downed with the same thick black hair that adorned his torso. It felt so wonderful just touching him that Jim felt his heart pound almost to bursting.

Artie's breathing quickened at the caress. "Oh, god, Jim," he whispered.

"Feel good?" Jim teased.

Artie tried to smile. "Damned good," he said. Quickly he climbed onto the bed, pulled Jim against him, and kissed him hard. Jim was surprised by his friend's aggression, but only for a second or two. Then he kissed Artie back, his heart thumping even harder, his body trembling with excitement.

"Jim...are you sure you really want this?"

Jim almost laughed at the absurdity of the question. "What do you think?" he demanded, deliberately pushing his swollen rigid erection against Artie's belly. Artie obviously reassured, swiftly moved his hand down and took Jim in a firm grasp again, and Jim, who had released Artie when they'd kissed, promptly took him back into his hand as well.

They kissed again, this time slowly, sensually, tasting each other's mouths as they both stroked and teased each other's erections, their caresses almost in sync.

"I love you, Jim, Artie murmured.

Jim felt warmth wash over him at the words. "I love you too..." he mumbled, his voice trailing off as he felt his breath get shorter and shorter. *I'm right on the edge*, he thought. He would've wanted this to last longer, much longer, but his self-control was fast unraveling. "Artie," he whispered, and then, the next second, he heard himself moan in the grips of a heart stopping climax.

"Jim..." He heard Artie speak his name as if from a distance. He opened his eyes, and saw his friend looking at him. In the lamplight, his dark eyes seemed to glow with a light of their own.

"You all right?" Artie asked.

Jim tried to smile. "Better than all right," he said. "Fantastic." In the throes of orgasm, he had stopped stroking Artie. Now he took him back into his hand. "Sorry I didn't finish. Is this okay?"

"You don't have to..."

"Oh, for crying out loud, Artie - I want to." Jim kissed him once more, realizing - with some surprise - that kissing Artie was as pleasant when he didn't have a hard-on as when he did. Then he started stroking his friend in earnest. Pumping hard, he watched Artie's face reflect his excitement until, abruptly, the other man cried out, and semen spurted into Jim's hand.

Jim reached for a handkerchief on the stand by the bed and cleaned them both up. Then he moved back into Artie's arms and gave him a hug.

"You feel...great," Artie said.

Jim laughed weakly. "I sure do."

"No...regrets?" Artie asked, almost as if afraid to hear the answer. "Or...revulsion?"

"None of either, Jim assured him. "That was incredible." He grinned drowsily. "Makes me wonder what I've been missing all these years," he said. "I think I might owe Dr. Loveless a thanks."

If Artie made a reply, Jim didn't hear him. He was already asleep.

The next morning Jim woke up feeling disoriented - knowing, even before he opened his eyes, that he wasn't in his own bed.

Then he remembered. Loveless...Lauralee...and Artie. *Artie!*

His eyes shot open. Artie was gone. For a half second Jim was alarmed; then he remembered that his partner had always been an early riser.

He looked up at the ceiling, trying to sort his thoughts.

Well, one thing was certain. Dr. Loveless' potion had done all the little man had bragged it would do. But another thing was equally certain - Jim didn't regret it. The night before had been wonderful. None of his women had ever made him feel the way Artie had made him feel last night.

Then a shadow passed over his thoughts as he wondered how Artie felt. Well, Artie hadn't been faking his excitement last night - that was for sure. And he had admitted to Jim that he had had unconventional relationships in the past. But had Artie really wanted it - as much as Jim had? Or had he just gone along with what Jim had wanted because he had been responding to Jim's desire, his need, rather than any desires of his own?

Suddenly he realized that it was foolish to keep lying there wasting time speculating when he could be finding out the answers. He pulled himself out of bed, retrieved his dressing gown from the floor where he'd dropped it, yanked it on, hurried into the main room - and saw his friend standing by the mantle, a troubled look on his face.

"Artie...what..."

Artie looked at him, and then, ever so imperceptibly, gestured with his eyes toward the divan. Jim turned his gaze...

And saw Lauralee sitting there.

She smiled at him - not a taunting smile. A sad smile.

"Your friend decided to pay us a visit this morning," Artie said, his voice flat. "I was just about to go wake you up."

Self-conscious of the fact that he was wearing only a dressing gown in the presence of a lady, Jim said, "Nice to see you again, miss. "I apologize for not being suitably dressed, but I wasn't expecting company."

"It's all right," Lauralee said, her voice soft. "I just wanted to come by to...to talk to you." She looked at Artie, as if for help. Artie obliged.

"Your friend's real name is Lauralee Manzula, Jim," he supplied. "And she came to apologize for kidnapping you the other day. Seems as if she's not one of Loveless' usual accomplices, but someone he just managed to persuade to go along with him by telling her lies about you."

"Miguelito was my friend," Lauralee said, "At least, I thought he was. But, as Mr. Gordon said, he lied to me. He said that you were a cruel, horrible man who had taken a woman away from him. But I have a pretty good instinct about people, and after you left I realized that he hadn't told the truth."

"How'd you know where to find me?" Jim asked.

"It wasn't hard. I overheard Miguelito talking to you about your train not being far from where we were, so I took a chance. Mr. West, I wish I could tell you how sorry I am for...what happened."

"Apologies aren't necessary," Jim said. "But if you really want to apologize, you could tell us where Loveless is."

"I told you before, I don't know. He mentioned he might go to New Mexico, but that was probably a lie too."

"Dr. Loveless is not exactly a paragon of truth."

"I realize that. I know I was a fool to listen to him, but...well, I knew him once, years ago, and he'd been a good friend to me then. It didn't occur to me that time, and prison, might have changed him. Ah, well...I didn't come here to just apologize. I wanted to talk to you..." She glanced at Artie. "Mr. Gordon...could you tell him?"

"I think you'd better," Artie's voice was cool, expressionless. Jim wondered what was wrong.

Lauralee looked at Jim again. "All right. I just wanted to tell you that - that Miguelito lied to you as well as to me. About the powder he gave you. All it was was white sugar." She opened her bag and brought out a packet - a packet that looked like the same one Loveless had shown him. "I brought it with me so you'd believe me," she said.

Jim took the packet, opened it, and tasted the powder with a finger. She was right; it was sugar. He looked up at Lauralee again, feeling bewildered. "I don't understand," he said. "This is just sugar, but it **did** have an effect on me. When I kissed you..."

"I know, you felt disgust. That was because of something I did," Lauralee said. "I'm a...do you know the term 'mesmer'?"

Jim shook his head. Artie spoke up. "That's a word for someone who hypnotizes people. Puts them in a trance and makes them do things they wouldn't ordinarily do."

Laurelee nodded. "Right. Well, I'm a mesmer. I used to work for a circus . That's how I met Miguelito, since he worked there for a time as well."

"I didn't know that."

Lauralee smiled slightly. "It's not something he brags about, Mr. West. He would prefer people to think he has a much more...respectable background. In any case...when I got you into my carriage the other night, you weren't rendered unconscious by a blow to the head, or by any other means. I hypnotized you instead. And later, of course, I gave you a post-hypnotic suggestion so that you would forget you'd ever been hypnotized."

"So that's why I didn't feel any aftereffects of a drug, or of being knocked out," Jim guessed.

"That's right. Because you weren't drugged or knocked out, at all."

"But that's crazy," Artie blurted. "I might not be an expert, but I know someone can't be hypnotized against their will."

"That's true - if they know the hypnosis is going to happen," Lauralee said. "But in this case, Jim thought I was just playing a game with him, so didn't think to fight against it." She looked back at Jim. "In any case, the purpose of my mesmerizing you was to

give you a command that when you kissed me - as Miguelito knew you would you would feel revulsion. And I also gave you..." She hesitated, and looked self-consciously at Artie.

"Go on," Artie said, his voice quiet.

Reluctantly Lauralee continued, "I gave you a post-hypnotic suggestion that, the next time your partner Artemus Gordon touched you, you would kiss him." She paused, and then added: "Passionately."

Jim remembered the night before, and realized - with a sudden sinking feeling - that that had been exactly what had happened. He had kissed Artie when Artie had touched him on the arm; not before. "I overheard Loveless saying that he was going to destroy what I loved the best," he said aloud. "I thought later that he meant he was going to take away my women, but he meant Artie, didn't he?"

"Yes. Or rather, your friendship with him. He said he'd had a long time to think about it in prison, and he decided that would be the best revenge he could hope for - to destroy your friendship with Mr. Gordon. And the moment he escaped from prison, he contacted me."

"But why did Loveless invent all that rigmarole about the powder"" Jim asked. "That's not his usual kind of lie."

"I know. But Miguelito - well, as much as I hate to say this, but I think his last time in prison affected his mind. He originally asked me to hypnotize you to do - all this, in order to ruin your friendship with Mr. Gordon, but then he decided to concoct this story that one of his magic formulas was responsible, until I think he actually believed it. I suppose he just couldn't bear the thought that it was actually me, and not him, that was doing it all." She shrugged. "That's just a guess, though. It could be that he just told you that in order to make you think the effects were permanent, instead of temporary."

Jim blinked. "What?"

"Hypnotic suggestions last only a short time, Mr. West - a day or two at the most," she explained. "There are some mesmers who've tried to use hypnosis to stop people from indulging in bad habits. For example, eating too much or smoking too much, or something of that nature. But it only works if the person really wants to change his habits - that is, if he would've done it anyway. And the effects wear off in time too."

Jim had a cold dead feeling in his belly. So the feelings he'd felt last night had been only temporary. He would never feel them again? He looked at Artie, but his partner quickly avoided his eyes.

"Well, I thank you for coming by, Miss Mazula," he said to Lauralee. "I'm very glad you did."

"So am I." Lauralee stood up. "I'm sorry I can't help you find Dr. Loveless to pay him back for what he tried to do to you, but I imagine you'll find him eventually."

Jim walked her to the door. "We will," he assured her. "The Secret Service isn't entirely without its resources."

"So I've heard," Lauralee reached for the knob, then stopped, looking at Artie again. "I know this is none of my business," she ventured, "but...I hope nothing has...happened that will affect your friendship with Mr. West, Mr. Gordon."

Artie shook his head. "No," he said quietly. "Believe me, nothing could do that."

"Good." Lauralee smiled. "I know you'll think me sentimental, but since I have no family myself I know all too well how valuable friendships can be. And I would hate to be responsible for anyone losing a friend on my account. That's why I came."

"Don't worry," Jim said. "Like Artie said, nothing could ever break up Artie's and my friendship - not even Loveless."

"Well, as I said, I'm glad. And, also as I said, the post-hypnotic suggestion I gave you should wear off soon, if it hasn't already. They seldom last more than twenty-four hours, and usually lose their effectiveness much sooner." She smiled again - a warm smile this time. "As a matter of fact," she said softly, "I'll prove it to you right now."

And before Jim knew what she was doing, she reached up a hand to his face and kissed him. All too aware that Artie was watching, Jim tried not to respond, but it was useless. Lauralee was very attractive, and despite the earlyness of the hour, he felt himself feel the all-too-familiar excitement he always experienced when kissing a beautiful lady.

Lauralee ended the kiss. "That was nice," she said, looking distinctly regretful. "I'm sorry I can't stay and continue to prove to you that your manhood is still intact, James West, but I have a train of my own to catch. And I suppose you'll be able to find someone else to do the proving for you, without my help." She flashed dimples, then hitched her skirts and left them.

Jim watched her mount her horse. Then, slowly, he closed the door behind her - to see Artie looking at him.

"Incredible, isn't it?" Artie said casually. "A mesmer. Dr. Loveless is really slipping to pull such cheap parlor tricks."

"Maybe." Jim walked toward his friend. "Artie...I..."

Artie's smile had no humor in it. "You don't have to say anything, Jim," he said. "It was a great night we shared - a one-time experience we'll both always remember. I don't regret it, and I don't want you to either. And we'll go on being friends just like we always have, okay?"

"We'll always be friends. But I don't...I don't want it to be over. I mean..." He felt somewhat embarrassed. Talking about things like desire and passion were all very well in the right setting, but in the cool light of day it was somewhat difficult. "You know what I mean?" he finished, a little lamely.

Artie nodded. "Yeah, I know," he said. "You feel guilty about last night and are trying to...well, let me down easy, I guess. But Jim, I don't want you like that."

"Like what?" Jim demanded. "You said - last night - that you loved me."

"I know what I said. But I don't want you to continue - a physical relationship with me just out of pity, or kindness. A relationship can't survive when it's built on those emotions. And I saw the way you enjoyed Lauralee's kissing you just now. Face it, you're always going to want women."

"Maybe," Jim admitted, "but I want you too. Artie, according to Lauralee, all she did was suggest to me that I kiss you when you touched me - that's it. But when I came back to the train, I was getting excited by you long before you touched me. That's why I couldn't sleep, and why I came out here for a shot of whisky."

Artie's eyes reflected hope for a moment; then they darkened again. "Maybe that was just because it's what you expected to feel," he said. "I mean, after what Loveless told you, and when you didn't respond to Lauralee's kiss, you thought you really had turned into a...man who likes other men. You expected to feel desire for me, so you did."

"Artie, I never feel desire just because I expect to. It's either there or it isn't. I think what happened is, I've wanted you for a long time, but what Loveless told me just...removed my inhibitions, I guess you could say." Jim moved even closer. "And I want what happened last night to happen again. Don't you?"

Artie looked away, and for a moment Jim thought he wasn't going to answer. Then, reluctantly: "Of course I do."

Jim smiled. "That's all I wanted to know." He moved his arms around Artie's shoulders.

"But Jim - it's not fair to you," Artie protested.

"I'll decide what's fair," Jim said. "And right now, I think it's be fair to both of us if I did a little test." He kissed him.

It felt as good as it had the night before. Better. And Jim - by the enthusiasm of his partner's response as he kissed him - knew Artie was enjoying it too.

After a few seconds he pulled back and looked at him. Artie managed a slight smile, but his eyes were glowing.

"There's an old bawdy joke we used to use in the theater," he said huskily. "It went something like, 'Is that a gun in your pocket or do you really like me?' "

Jim grinned. "Come on, Artie. Where would I hide a gun in this robe?" He touched his face. "But, to answer your question. I really like you," he said. "As a matter of fact, I love you." He paused, then added, his voice even softer: "In every way."

"Oh, God, Jim..." Artie's voice had hushed to a whisper. "I know this is selfish, but I'd give anything if that were true."

"Well - why don't we give it a try?" Jim suggested. "Let's go back to bed, right now, and see if it's as good as it was last night, when I was hypnotized."

Artie let out a sigh. "I should say no," he admitted. "But I guess you know I won't." He pulled Jim's face to his for another kiss.

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Two days later, the train stopped at Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Jim and Artie prepared to de-board in pursuit of Dr. Loveless.

Artie, as he knotted his tie in the mirror, said, "Y'know, for once I'm hoping we meet up with that little man again. I'd really like to ask him what the hell he did to you."

Jim's arms moved around Artie from behind, giving him a hug. "You mean you think Lauralee was lying?" he teased. "That he really did give me one of his magic potions rather than having a mesmer hypnotize me?"

Artie shook his head. "No. I mean I'd like to know if he gave you an aphrodisiac." He turned around in Jim's arms, and smiled at him. "Or are you always this - eager?"

Jim grinned back. "Only with you."

"I'll bet you say that to all the guys."

"I'll never tell. You know something? I hope we meet up with Loveless too, so I'll have an opportunity to thank him. I'll bet the knowledge that he played Cupid would outrage him so much he'd have a stroke. At the very least, his face would be priceless."

Artie laughed. "I'll be it would be, at that," he said. He reached up and straightened Jim's tie. "Now that you mention it, I wouldn't mind seeing his face myself."

Both of them were still laughing when they left the train.

Night of the Surprise

by ***Mary Millard***

Due to the lateness of the hour, Secret Service agent James West was surprised to still see a dim light emanating from his partner Artemus Gordon's bedroom as he rode up to the train. Presuming Artemus to be reading in bed as usual, Jim made his way inside silently, moving with deliberate stealth in hopes of surprising his friend. Almost on tiptoe he stole up to the closed bedroom door and paused, contemplating exactly what he wanted to do.

Which was fortunate for all concerned, he thought later, realizing how awkward the situation could have become if he'd merely gone striding into the room. For through the silence Jim clearly heard Artie's voice murmuring softly to someone, definitely not talking in his sleep or reading aloud. Though he knew he shouldn't, he lingered to hear the sound of the responding voice, wondering if the lady might be someone he knew.

The next murmuring Jim heard, however, brought his eyes wide open, for rather than the soft feminine tones he'd expected, the voice Jim heard was as male as Artie's own. It was all he could do to merely stand at the door and continuing listening, fascinated, without going inside. He could scarcely believe that what he was hearing could be true.

But the stranger's words, what few Jim could discern due to their muted voices, left no doubt as to what was happening. The breathless sound of "Oh God, Artie, deeper" brought a flush to Jim's face and finally sent him away from the door, still taking care not to be heard. He slowly made his way into his own sleeping compartment where he closed the door and sank down on the bed in a state of shock.

Artemus Gordon was having sex with another man. The thought went through Jim's mind like an endless kaleidoscope scene. They had shared the train for nearly seven years as partners, yet Jim had never suspected Gordon of having such tendencies. He'd never had cause to question Artie's paramours previously, and knew well how attractive to the ladies Artemus was. Yet now he found himself wondering how many other evenings, when Jim had presumed him to be off courting some young beauty, Artie had really been with another man. He suspected it was far more often than he cared to think. at the thought of what his partner was doing. He felt more curious than anything else. Though he had always been fond of sexual activities and eager to try new things, Jim had never considered having sex with another man. More because the opportunity had never presented

itself, he realized, than because he was opposed to the thought. Though he had always considered himself an open-minded person, Jim was still surprised by his feeling of intrigue at this.

The memory of Artie's breathless lover haunted Jim as he undressed that evening, his actions slowed by his pre-occupied thoughts. Removing his clothing, he found himself wondering what his partner was doing, with whom, and how. Stripping down to his shorts, he sighed, rubbing at his now-uncomfortably hard erection, his libido stirred by visions of Artie's sexual activities. Knowing sleep would never come while he was so highly aroused, Jim pulled off the white shorts and laid down on his bed with a sigh, closing his eyes.

The hand resting so lightly on his groin belonged to Artemus Gordon. It had to. No one else would know how to touch him so tenderly. Jim sighed, smiling contentedly as the hand caressed his upper thigh, on its way to a more vital spot. He kept his eyes closed, waiting - and trembling.

Then the warm hand moved over his penis, cupping the swollen shaft like a silken glove. Momentarily still, it simply held him, warming him all the way to his heart. Then the fingers spread slightly and began to move along the length of him, sliding up and down the velvet-soft skin. Jim closed his eyes tighter, finally unable to bite back a soft moan.

A moment later Artie seemed to read his mind as his hand slipped lower, moving down to fondle the heavy testicles. Jim moaned gain, louder this time, barely able to control himself. That was his weakness, to have his balls fondled, something Artie seemed to instinctively sense. Giving himself over to the delicious sensations, Jim raised his hips in a plea for more.

And Artie gave more, gladly, his hand working miracles Jim had only dreamed of before. Soon the younger agent was trembling, clearly on the brink and unable to take anything more. Recognizing the symptoms of imminent climax, Artie backed away for a few moments, but soon resumed where he had left off once he knew his lover had regained control. This time, his restraint more rigid, Jim was able to restrict his responses to frequent, soft moans.

Then Artie began making love to him in earnest, one hand fondling the tight sac as the other stroked the heavy staff. There would be no turning back this time, Jim sensed as his breathing grew labored. Artie would bring him to much-needed completion at last. Every nerve ending in his body suddenly seemed centered in his groin as he arched his back once more.

"Oh God! Artie!" The hoarse cry escaped his lips at the same moment his orgasm began. Unable to lie still, he continued to thrust himself into the tunnel Artie so willingly provided, trying to prolong the sensations as long as he could. Though he had no idea of the actual time duration of his climax, he felt it felt very, very good.

He was covered with a cold sweat and panting when the fantasy ended and reality returned to him, his hand and belly sticky with ejaculate. The images had been almost too real, he realized, and were more than a fantasy too - it was what he wanted to have happen in reality also, something he suddenly wanted very much. As he drew a long shaky breath, he wondered if it ever could happen - or if it even should.

Obviously Artie had deliberately chosen not to share his secret love life with his partner for some purpose, Jim reasoned, perhaps to avoid such intimacy. As he washed himself with tepid water from the basin on his dresser, Jim felt vaguely disturbed that he'd had to find out Artie's special "interest" in such a stealthy way. Gordon's lack of candor on the subject was not like his normally-open friend at all.

Which left him with only one logical conclusion - Artemus didn't find him attractive in any sort of sexual way. Recalling all the times they had undressed and changed clothes around one another, Jim knew Artie had not lacked for opportunity to let him know. The thought left him more than a little depressed as he returned to bed in search of sleep. It was a very long time in coming.

Waking well past dawn the following morning, Jim felt annoyed with himself, and with the world in general. His night's sleep less than restful, he had found himself tossing and turning, his rest haunted by vague and unpleasant dreams. Sleep hadn't erased

the all-too-vivid memory of what he had discovered about his partner late the night before.

Pulling on pants, socks and shoes, Jim didn't bother donning a shirt before making his way out to the main section of the train car. He wasn't surprised to see Artemus sitting at the table poring over an issue of the local paper, his customary morning routine. West reached past him to pour a cup of coffee, hoping the stimulant might improve his mood.

"Good morning, James," Artie said brightly, his words so lifting they were almost a chirp. "I trust you slept well?"

"Actually, no. I slept lousy." Jim took the steaming cup and sat down. "Obviously you must have had a good night, though. You're certainly cheery enough today."

Glancing up when his partner failed to answer, Jim felt a flash of guilt, and anger at himself for spoiling Artie's mood. The handsome face no longer smiling, Artemus clearly had taken West's caustic words to heart. Jim sighed, and dropped his head.

"I'm sorry, Artie," he apologized. "I don't mean to take it out on you. I just didn't have a good night."

"So I gather. Any particular reason?" Artie sounded truly concerned. "You were out late enough I thought you were probably having a pretty nice time."

As if you have any idea when I got in. Jim pushed his annoyance aside. "Actually, I was home by midnight," he answered evenly. "The town here doesn't have much of a night life or else I wasn't in the mood for it. I don't know which."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Artie took a sip of coffee and paused. "Well, we shouldn't have to stay here much longer," he offered hopefully. "The trial is tomorrow, and after that we should be free to go on to something else."

"I hope so. All this idle time is driving me nuts." Jim got up and walked over to the window, peering out. "At least today looks like better weather. Maybe I can take a ride somewhere."

"Want some company? I wouldn't mind getting out too." Artie came to stand at the window beside his friend. "Unless you'd rather be alone, that is," he added quickly. "If you would, I'd understand."

"No, I don't mind." Jim was surprised by Artie's remarks. "I just thought you'd probably have something better to do."

"Such as what, another experiment? In case you haven't noticed, those get tiresome, even to me." Artie patted Jim's shoulder affectionately. "No, I think it would be nice if we could spend some time together. We haven't done that in a long time. It's nice to think we can be friends as well as partners, you know."

Except I'd like to be a lot ***more*** *than friends,* Jim thought glumly, acutely aware that Artie's hand had lingered on his shoulder, still resting there. "Somehow I've never doubted our friendship," he responded, trying to push his thought aside. "But you're right - it **has** been a long time. Why don't you pack us some lunch while I finish getting dressed and then we can go."

His spirits revived a little by the plans for their outing, Jim returned to the table and finished his coffee in one long gulp. He was surprised to find Artemus watching him as he finished, the dark eyes bearing an explanation Jim couldn't quite read. He passed it off to his over-active imagination and wishful thinking, and retired to his bedroom to finish getting dressed.

The sun was warm but not hot, the breeze significant yet not too much. The day was nearly perfect in every way. Riding high into the hills above town, away from anyone but each other, Jim sensed that both he and Artie felt more free than they had in some time. He cherished the frequent glances he was able to steal of his partner, admiring the rugged form in a whole new way. By the time they stopped for lunch and a rest break, Jim knew his feelings for Artemus Gordon had been irrevocably changed by what he had learned the night before.

They were nearly through lunch when Jim looked up to find Artie's eyes on him, studying him much as he had earlier on the train. This time, however, Jim tipped his head and returned the querying gaze instead of looking away. Obviously not intending to be caught in the act, Artemus blushed and dropped his eyes, embarrassed, but then seemed to find a new resolve. This time, he looked up, lifted his chin and met Jim's gaze steadily.

"You know I wasn't alone last night, don't you?" Artie's direct question caught West off guard. "How much did you overhear?"

"Enough to be surprised by your choice of bed partners," Jim replied quietly, his eyes downcast. "And to tell me I don't know you as well as I thought." The blue eyes lifted, meeting Artie's brown. "Enough to make me wonder why you haven't told me when we've been partners all these years."

"I was afraid you wouldn't understand, that's why," Artie said sadly. "Just like I can see you don't understand now." He looked down, toying with a blade of grass. "Even more I was afraid you'd request another partner, and I didn't want to lose you. "You're the best friend I've ever had."

"And you're **my** best friend, Artie." Jim reached out to touch his arm. "And you're wrong - I **do** understand. How it can happen, at least. I'm only sorry you've never wanted that kind of relationship with me."

"Sorry?" Artie stared at his partner, clearly stunned. "Jim, are you - you can't be serious!"

"I can't? Well, you should have told that to my body last night." Grinning, West laid back on the grass. "It obviously had other ideas once it heard what you had going on."

"You could hear...that much?" Artie asked hesitantly. "When you came home?"

"When I saw your light on, I planned to come in and surprise you," Jim explained, "so I stopped outside your door. Then I heard voices. I was a little surprised when I realized your companion's voice was just as male as mine."

Glancing up to see his friend's reaction, Jim wasn't surprised to see the older man blush, a trait he found sweetly endearing somehow. Somehow finding the courage, Jim spontaneously changed his position, moving so that his head rested on Artie's leg. Then he turned to look up into his partner's face.

"You don't have anything to be embarrassed about, Artie," he said softly. "You have a right to be with whomever you please. I wish you'd told me about it, and I wish we could share it, but I understand. Last night it was just a little hard to take, that's all."

"I'm sorry you overheard us." Jim felt Artie's fingers touch his hair. "I always try to be quiet, but sometimes - Besides, you came home earlier than I realized."

"Obviously." Jim felt something like a light caress brush his forehead. "I didn't mean to put you in an awkward position. I just wanted you to know you don't have to hide from me anymore. If you want to bring someone back to the train for an evening - a man - it's all right."

Definitely feeling fingers on his cheek, Jim looked up, surprised to find a mist over Artie's dark eyes as he gazed down at West tenderly. Stunned by what could only be described as a loving expression, Jim held his breath as he waited for Artie to say something, yearning to know what was on his mind. When the strong fingers ran along his cheek then brushed his lips, Jim shivered involuntarily. He could also no longer withhold the question preying on his mind.

"What was he like? You friend last night?" Jim felt driven to know more about his partner's mysterious paramour. "Was it - good for you?"

"The sex was all right. Nothing spectacular." Artie's hand fell away, as the dark eyes dropped. "He was - in terms of physical features, he looked a lot like you - dark hair, green eyes, small stature. Emotionally it meant almost nothing at all." He stopped then, again lifting his hand to Jim's cheek as he sadly searched the younger man's eyes.

"If only you knew how much I wanted that man to be you last night," Artie whispered. "Him and all the others before. All they've ever been are poor substitutes for you. Someone to help fill the empty space and the lonely nights. That was the real reason I couldn't tell you," he admitted. "I wanted you too damned much, and I knew you'd never feel the same."

"You - wanted me?" Jim could barely push the words from his astonished throat. "But all these years. You never gave me a clue."

"Would you have given me a clue if you'd had feelings like this?" Artie countered, his fingers still caressing Jim's cheek. "No, you would have felt the same way I did - afraid. I still can't believe that I'm saying this now."

"And I can't believe what I'm hearing." Jim boldly caught hold of his partner's hand then brought it to his lips, gently kissing the palm. He saw as much as felt the shudder that coursed through Artie's body at the action, giving him the courage to nuzzle for a moment as well. Then it was his turn to shiver as Artie molded his fingers around Jim's chin and gently rubbed.

There was no longer any need for words. Their actions said it all. His motions careful and gentle, Artie moved from beneath Jim to lie beside him, propped up on one elbow as he gazed down at the younger man. Looking up, knowing his own eyes were undoubtedly love-filled, Jim could scarcely believe the desire and passion emanating from Gordon's dark orbs.

But there was no room left for doubt when Artie lowered his mouth toward Jim's, his intentions clear in his eyes. Watching the dark head approach, Jim held his breath in anticipation of their first kiss. When Artie's lips finally did find and meet his, the kiss was sweet as honey and incredibly tender, filled with more passion than Jim had ever known.

Gradually the kiss deepened, Artie's tongue finding its way into Jim's mouth where it lingered and explored. Responding eagerly, Jim reciprocated the tender exploration, his erotic senses heightening to a fever pitch. When Artie finally pulled away from him, slightly breathless, Jim felt an acute sense of loss.

"I can't believe you're letting me do this," Artie murmured, looking stunned. "It's wonderful, but...why?"

"Why? Simple - I love you." Jim was amused by Artie's continued disbelief. "Last night I was convinced you hadn't told me because you didn't want me. It's nice to find out that I was wrong."

"Very wrong," Artie assured him. "You're the only man I really **have** wanted for years. The others were, like I said, only substitutes."

"So why don't you try the real thing and see how you like it?" Jim made his voice deliberately deep yet seductively soft. "I might not be very good at some things in the beginning, but I'm more than willing to try."

"You won't have to try. You're a natural." Artie sat up then, and looked around. "Come on, let's move the blanket out under those trees," he gestured. "We'll be out of the direct sunlight there."

Nodding his agreement, Jim realized his heart was pounding with anticipation as he got up to help move the blanket, the intentional act making it all seem more real somehow. Not that he had any doubts about what they were doing; it still sounded wonderful. He only wondered if he would be able to satisfy his more experienced partner - and prayed with all his heart that he could.

Almost from the first moment the blanket was placed in position, Jim sensed an unleashing of passion in his partner that surpassed his wildest imaginings. Artie's hands were everywhere at once, Jim thought, though he knew it was impossible. Still, at the same time he felt his shirt being unbuttoned, a hand was also caressing his face. Finally, Jim simply gave in to all the delicious sensations and let Artemus have his way.

And what a wonderful way it was, West quickly discovered. He nearly melted under the experienced hands that expertly touched and caressed him so tenderly. From his face to his groin, Artie's hands missed nothing, particularly after he'd unbuttoned Jim's flannel shirt and bared the muscle-laden chest. From then on his was the touch of a master with whom Jim knew he could never compete.

Jim knew his nipples normally had little or no feeling, and certainly had never been erogenous areas. Yet when Artie ran his finger across the tip of the left one then dallied to rub at it, Jim shivered with delight as feelings of arousal surged into his groin. He had barely adjusted to the feelings centered in that area when Artie moved to the other side, creating the same intense sensations there. By the time he finished and moved on, Jim was so aroused he could scarcely lie still.

Artemus, however, was far from finished, and continued his loving travels farther down the length of Jim's lean form. He stroked the hard thighs, discreetly sliding his hands around to the inside then cleverly moving upward to the obvious bulge in Jim's aching groin. When he paused there, his hand cupping the heavy testicles, West couldn't withhold his heartfelt moan.

"Oh, Artie," he murmured. "God, that feels so good!" Though being vocal wasn't his custom, he couldn't seem to help himself now. "Everything you've done - it's wonderful."

"Good. I'm glad you like it." Artie ran his hand lightly over the swollen bulge of Jim's erection, almost caressing the brown corduroy pants. "I can think of a few things you'd probably like even better, but you have on too many clothes. Mind if I remedy that situation a little? Up here no one can see us anyway."

"The way I feel right now I wouldn't care if the whole world could see us." Having removed his gun belt earlier, Jim quickly undid the fastener on his jeans. At that point he stopped abruptly, uncertain exactly what his friend had in mind. He had no doubt Artie could easily take things from there, and didn't want to misinterpret his friend's intentions in any way. Consequently, trying hard to quell his impatience, Jim forced himself to abandon his efforts at undressing and laid back down.

"Ah, just what I like - surrender." Artie seemed to purr the words as he slowly pulled the zipper down on Jim's pants. "And from such a beautiful subject too."

Simultaneously amused and aroused by Artie's seductive murmuring, Jim watched the older man's face, amazed that such tenderness could be meant for him. Yet he knew it was by the way Gordon touched him, the gentleness in his hands - cooperatively he lifted his hips as Artie tugged at his pants then quickly pulled them back. He sighed with relief as his heavy erection was finally set free.

"Somehow I always knew you'd be a beauty." Artie's soft words took Jim by surprise somehow, almost as much as his tender gaze. "You don't know how often I've dreamed of this." His fingers gently closed around Jim's thick shaft. "God, you feel good!"

As if he thought what he was doing didn't feel good to Jim! After just two or three strokes, the younger agent was ready to come and knew he would if Artemus didn't slow down. Reluctantly, he caught hold of Artie's wrist and gently squeezed.

"Easy there, partner," he murmured. "I don't want this to be over yet. Take it a little slower, okay?"

"I'll try, but no promises this time." Artie caressed the length of Jim's body with his eyes. "I want you so bad it's all I can do to hold back now."

"Okay, so don't hold back." Jim sat up and began undoing the buttons on his partner's plaid shirt. "We'll both get a turn sooner or later, so why don't we start with you. That'll give me a chance to cool off and you - well, you do whatever feels right."

"But that isn't fair," Artemus protested. "I started this. You should - I should - Oh, Jim!"

The moan prompted by nothing more than a caress of Jim's hand across Artie's chest, and a light one at that, told Jim how highly stimulated his partner was. Deciding actions would prove more effective than words for the moment, West continued to undress the older agent, smiling at the lack of protest from his friend. Artie even assisted by voluntarily undoing his zipper and then pushing his pants down below his hips. Then he laid back, apparently content to let West have his way.

At the sight of Gordon's penis, Jim paused for a moment, simply gazing at his partner in awe. Somehow he hadn't expected quite an impressive display of maleness as that which met his gaze. Long and thick, Artie's erection was full and throbbing when he released it, an undeniable statement of his need for Jim. Still awed, Jim moved closer and took the massive organ in his hand timidly.

"Don't be afraid, Jim. You won't hurt me."

Jim looked down to find Artie's dark gaze fixed on his face.

"I know this is all new to you, so just do as much as you feel comfortable with. Your willingness to do even this much is wonderful."

Touched by the gracious allowance, Jim found himself strangely fortified with new courage, enabling him to increase his explorations of the weighty shaft. Running his hand up and down its length, he paused to rub the tip when a clear drop of moisture appeared on it, a slick lubrication he gingerly spread around the spongy head. He wasn't surprised to see Artie's eyes closed and his breathing unsteady when he glanced up.

Jim was surprised how naturally the actions came to him, almost as if he were making love to himself. In many ways, he realized, it wasn't unlike the many

times of self-pleasure he'd known in the past. Except this time it was Artie he was making love to, Artie he was lavishing his attentions on instead of himself. Strangely excited by that realization, Jim became even more eager to continue on.

He was rubbing the tight balls when Artemus began moaning, a low sound that seemed a mixture of agony and ecstasy. Sensing the sounds were not ones of displeasure, West continued, pleased when Artie began thrusting his hips upward in search of Jim's hand. More than happy to oblige, Jim tightened his grip on the rosy shaft and began to supply firmer, more rapid strokes.

"Oh God, Jim." The words resembled a whimper, unlike anything Jim had ever heard from his friend. "Please - just like that. More."

Realizing he'd been rubbing the soft head with his index finger while at the same time stroking, Jim continued the action, then thought of something else. He was unprepared for Artie's strangled gasp and cry the first moment he gently licked the swollen head with a firm tongue.

"Jim! Yes!" Startled by the cry, it took Jim a moment to realize that this too was a sound of pleasure, that his partner wanted more. Continuing with the action, he lapped beneath the spongy ridge also, amazed when Artie clutched at his head as he thrust into Jim's mouth. Despite the foreign nature of their actions, Jim managed to accept him without choking, still focusing his attention on the leaking tip.

But it was only a few moments later when he felt his partner stiffen beneath him and heard Gordon's sharp cry. Then before he had time to think or react he felt the first warm drops of semen bathe his tongue as Artie's orgasm began and continued, the throbbing cock spewing its life force into Jim's waiting mouth. Recovering quickly from his initial surprise, Jim found himself savoring the intimate act and cherishing each precious drop of his partner's love.

It was several moments before Artie expended himself and relaxed, panting, his body covered with a light sheen of sweat. Gently releasing the spent penis from his mouth, Jim felt a gust of wind brush by them, causing him to pull Artie's shirt together to ward off a chill. He smiled when Gordon reached up to lay a light hand on his cheek, prompting him to look up.

"I love you, Jim," Artie whispered, his dark eyes misty. "Even more than I knew. What you did there - how you made me feel, was - there aren't any words."

"As long as you liked it, I don't need words," Jim answered, smiling. "And something tells me you did. I only hope you know I did it because I love you too."

"I never had doubt about it." Artie shivered with a delayed aftershock. "I only hope I can make it half as good for you."

"You will. You already have, really." Jim smiled at Artie's puzzled frown. "What you let me do for you felt almost as good as if I'd come myself."

"Ah, but just wait until that really **does** happen." Artie's eyes were sparkling as he sat up. "With any luck at all this will be something you'll never forget."

Apparently deeming that a good point at which to end the conversation, Artie leaned forward to initiate a tender, lingering kiss. Jim scarcely even realized he was being propelled backward until he opened his eyes again and saw blue sky through the trees above him, Artie's manipulations were so incredibly smooth. Then Jim felt the soft kisses moving across his chest and down his belly, and with a sigh he closed his eyes.

The next span of time passed in an indescribable haze of passion for Jim, time-filled with loving more tender than anything he'd ever known. As Artemus kissed, caressed and nibbled his way down the lean torso Jim all but lost his mind, once again discovering erotic portions of his body he'd never known before. By the time Artie reached his groin it was all Jim could do to stay still on the blanket, his tumid cock aching beyond belief. By the time Artie finally touched the core of his desire, Jim knew he was too stimulated to last.

Much to his surprise, however, Artie demonstrated a few techniques which did delay Jim's climax for a few minutes, long enough to prolong his pleasure a little, at least. Though he thought for sure he'd come when Artie kneaded his balls then pressed them up tight to his body, he was surprised to find it took the edge off his need instead. He was delighted to simply relax and place himself in his partner's capable hands.

But a few minutes later the point of no return arrived for him, coming the moment a hot, wet cavern surrounded his cock. Jim gasped, his eyes flying

open as he looked down to see the dark head bowed over his groin. As Artie gently sucked and licked at the now-constantly oozing head, Jim moaned deeply, resisting the urge to hold his partner's head and press it down. Instead he raised his hips to let his needs and desires be known.

He heard Artemus chuckle softly at that, clearly understanding Jim's wordless plea. The suction increased, as did the pace of both mouth and hand strokes. It took only seconds before Jim felt the onset of his orgasm, his cock swelling more as he clutched Artie's head. "Artie, now!" he cried out in warning. "Oh God!"

Later he realized that he'd expected his partner to pull back at that shout of warning, to finish him off with only his hand. Instead, however, the older man continued to suck and stroke until Jim's climax was through. An incredible climax, West marveled when conscious thought finally returned to him. It was better than anything he'd ever known. After taking a few seconds to regain control of his senses, Jim managed to open his still-glazed eyes.

"You sounded like that might have been good for you." Artie's eyes were fixed on Jim's face. "I hope so. I tried."

"It was wonderful, Artie. Perfect." Jim shuddered involuntarily. "I thought my fantasy last night was terrific, but it couldn't compare to this."

"You had a fantasy last night? About our being together?" Jim saw the spark of interest in his lover's eyes. "Honestly?"

"Honestly," Jim smiled, raising his hand in a vow of honor. "I told you earlier that listening to you aroused me last night."

"Yeah, but I thought - Aw, who cares about fantasies anyway?" Spontaneously, Artemus reached out to pull his partner close. "All I care about is finally being with you, and being honest - and hoping this can happen again."

"I don't see why it shouldn't," Jim shrugged casually. "We certainly have plenty of opportunities on the train. Maybe we won't have to spend as much time looking for substitutes now either. Hmm?"

As he paused to await Artie's answer, Jim nuzzled the thick neck playfully, even gently licking at the hollow of Gordon's throat. He couldn't help chuckling when Artie gave a sound that resembled strangling in lieu of an answer, forcing West to move elsewhere so his friend could talk.

"I'd say, now that I can talk," Artemus said finally, "that I don't care to **ever** have another substitute. Now that I've had the real thing I could never be satisfied with anything less. Not that I expect the same for you, of course," he added quickly. "You still - you prefer woman, I know."

"Don't be too sure of that," Jim retorted. "I've never had any woman make me feel like you did just now. Something tells me settling for second best from now on may be difficult for me too."

Though he didn't comment on it, Jim didn't miss the look of hope which flashed through Artie's dark eyes, lingering only a moment before Artie bowed his head to capture Jim's mouth in another kiss. As he lost himself in the pleasure of his new-found love and lover, Jim thought back to the previous evening, to the surprise he'd planned for Artemus. He was more than happy the surprise had turned out to be on him.

THE NIGHT OF REVELATIONS

by Taliesin

"Oh my god, no... Jim..."

He could still hear it, that choked despairing sob, in no way like the millions of other times Artie had said his name in the years they'd been partners.

James West shifted restlessly, trying unsuccessfully to find a comfortable position. The bed was not the problem; like everything in the private car, it was luxury itself. Nor was the familiar rocking of the train keeping him awake. The first few days after they'd been assigned the exclusive use of the train, he and Artie had experienced difficulty in sleeping, like new sailors getting their sea-legs. By now, however, the motion was almost second-nature, and he often found it hard to sleep in the absence of the lulling movement. The recent bullet wound in his calf throbbed somewhat, but did not prove a major impediment to his comfort. Nonetheless, awake he was, by his inner clock more than two hours after retiring for the night. Since sleep was obviously going to prove elusive, Jim propped his head on his hands and turned himself over to thought instead.

It had been close, this one. Very close. As Secret Service agents for President Grant, James West and Artemus Gordon had faced any number of apparently hopeless situations and had, every time, managed to pull their, and their country's, proverbial fat out of the fire. There was no exaggeration to their reputation; they were, quite simply, the best. This time had nearly been the end of them.

Though he suffered from the eternal failing of all petty-minded outlaws — that of blaming interceding lawmen for the failure of his nefarious scheme and subsequent incarceration — Emmet Stark had proved a very clever man indeed, as the complexity of his plan attested. Only by the merest chance had they escaped his imaginative revenge. West didn't like chance; it operated by its own rules, and in its own good time.

Meticulous planning and the advantage of surprise had guaranteed that everything went Stark's way right from the start. At the time, Jim had counted himself lucky to escape the ambush in Paradox with a bullet in the right calf. He later realized that luck had had nothing whatsoever to do with it. They had wanted him hurting, just slightly out of fighting form, but not overly damaged. By the time Stark's machinations herded him into the deserted town's tiny telegraph office, he knew very well the only answer he'd be receiving was from his enemy. He doubted he would ever forget that message: COUNT THE HOURS, MR WEST. TOMORROW YOU WILL DIE HATING YOURSELF FOR WHAT YOU WILL HAVE DONE.

What he would have done was kill Artie. Artemus Gordon, his friend and partner, and the other man against whom Stark had vowed revenge. Less than twenty-four hours ago, West would have wagered literally anything against the remotest possibility he might ever harm his friend. However, a devilishly elaborate series of carefully managed events had set the stage for precisely that. Drugs which distorted the senses had made it simplicity itself to convince each of them that the other was Stark's man. Once shots had been fired on both sides, the deadly battle was joined in earnest, with no time for thought. They were lucky that the same combination of drugs and pain which had been necessary to put him into a state where he could mistake Artie for anyone else had also thrown off his normally dead-eye aim. He had

only winged Artie before pure chance led him to deduce Stark's plan. Fortunate, really, to have shot him in the leg rather than the heart; still, Jim doubted he could ever forgive himself for hurting his friend. It never occurred to him that he had caused Artie far more pain by pretending to be dead.

The train's swaying gait lulled Jim's racing mind into a twilight stupor. He did not sleep, nor did he awaken, but he knew something had changed. After a moment's perusal, he made out the darker shape in the shadows near the door. Diffuse moonlight leaked through the small windows, faintly reflecting from Artie's dark hair, picking out the contours of his pale face, lost forever in the midnight depths of his eyes. He slouched in a chair near the door, eyes apparently fixed on West.

"Artie?" The name was little more than a whisper on his lips.

"Sorry, Jim. Didn't mean to wake you." Artie's voice was soft, thoughtful. He didn't move.

"You didn't. I was thinking; guess I drifted off a little." Jim smiled; a quick flash of strong white teeth in the darkness. He shifted to light the lamp at his bedside, but Artie's voice reached him before he found the matches.

"Don't. The darkness is nice sometimes, don't you think?" Jim didn't, but he obeyed the wistful note in his partner's voice and left the room to its shadows. Artie shifted; Jim thought he lifted a hand to his face, then let it fall back to his lap, but he wasn't certain.

"Should you be up?" Artie had lost a lot of blood from the bullet wound in his left thigh before they'd found a doctor to stitch him up.

"Couldn't sleep." Which didn't answer the question. Or perhaps it did, all too well.

"Me neither." There was silence between them. It was hard to tell in the dim light, but West thought Artie's eyes remained steady on him. Not knowing quite what to say, he remained silent.

"You took an awful risk, James, my boy," Artemus said finally. "I've seen you do a lot of stupid things, but to stand there, waiting for me to come through that door with a rifle... I'd hoped you thought better of my aim than to believe I couldn't hit a stationary target at thirty feet."

"On the contrary, I was counting on your aim." He flashed that cocky grin again. "I was in Paradox for a day and a half. The first thing I did was check out the Sheriff's office. Every rifle there was miscalibrated. If you so much as pointed the gun directly at me, the bullet was sure to go wide. I knew, as good as you are, it wouldn't take you more than two shots to adjust, so I dropped after the first one."

"Why do suppose they'd stock faulty guns?" West was surprised at the question; Artie was usually better at riddles than he.

"Oh, I expect for the same reason they left you without any spare ammunition. The purpose of the exercise was for me to kill you, not the other way around. Stark must have guessed you might go for the Sheriff's office after your revolver came up empty. Guess he didn't anticipate you throwing your gun at me."

"Or you bothering to look at it." Jim caught a faint glimmer of teeth and grinned back. Artie was in an oddly subdued mood; he was glad to see even that meager hint of a smile.

"Well, your initials engraved on the butt certainly helped." Jim fell silent, remembering that feeling, looking at the shiny gold initials on the gun of the man he'd just shot. That paralyzing moment of realization had shaken him to the core. "You're wrong, you know," he admitted quietly after a moment, "I didn't stand there calmly waiting for you. I was stunned, I guess; there seemed no time at all between when I looked at the gun and when you came out with the rifle. Didn't really make a decision about it, just looked up and saw you."

Artemus was silent; Jim wasn't even sure he was breathing. After a long moment, he released his breath on a sigh. "You mean all that about the guns..."

"Oh, it's true enough. I just don't remember thinking it through at the time."

"You could have called to me to stop."

"I expect they would have shot both of us the instant I did. Stark was waiting for one of us to die. So I died." He shrugged, trying to make light of it.

"Yes, you did, didn't you?" There didn't seem to be anything to say to that. Finally, Artie sighed. "I suppose I ought to try to get some sleep." But he didn't move.

"Can you get back to your room on your own?" Jim prompted gently after a moment.

"Of course. Goodnight, James." Artie shook his head, as if only just awakening, and pushed himself gingerly to his feet.

"Night, Artie." But Artemus stopped with his hand on the door, his face turned away. Jim suddenly understood. He wasn't all that keen on letting Artie out of his sight either. "Artie? Don't leave."

"Jim?" Gordon turned toward him, stepping haltingly forward, then paused hesitantly. He was standing in the brightest shaft of moonlight which penetrated the cabin, allowing Jim to see him clearly. Uncertainty warred with wistful desire in the familiar features.

"Stay, Artie. Please." West made room for Artie in the bed and lifted back the blankets. The invitation was clear.

Artie shed his dressing gown, draping it over the back of the chair, and climbed under the warm covers. The narrowness of the bed necessitated their lying in close proximity, though neither was disposed to complain. Jim turned on his side and propped his head on one hand to watch Artie settle in. After a moment, he freed a hand to tuck the blanket more snugly about the older man's shoulders. His eyes already drooping wearily, Artemus smiled sleepily at the tender gesture. James let his head rest on the pillow and watched his partner tumble into slumber. Lulled by the soft steady breath of the sleeping man, he quickly followed him into Morpheus' embrace.

James dreamed he stood again on the street in Paradox, Artie's gun in hand. He knew he was dreaming, and that what he dreamt was real. Everything proceeded just as it had happened. He lifted his eyes from golden initials to watch Artie lurch out of the Sheriff's office, a rifle clasped tightly in his hands. As if to mock him with his previous inability to recognize his best friend, the dream Artie was undisguised, his face clearly visible. Jim stood unmoving as the rifle lifted to center on his chest, the charge going off with a roar. On cue he staggered and fell.

The silence was absolute. Jim had fallen with his back to Artie, and now wished he had not. After a moment, he was able to make out the faint sound of his partner's shuffling approach. The footsteps faltered just behind him. He strained to hear any movement. Then Artie's voice, sounding thick and oddly muffled, reached him.

"Oh my god, no..." The rifle slid from nerveless fingers to land near Jim's head. Mindless of his injury, Artie dropped to his knees, his hands tightening in a bonecrushing grip on Jim's arm. "Jim..." The name emerged on a pent-up sob.

Artie snatched his hands back as if burned when West shifted enough to look up at him. He was too stunned to smile, but his eyes seemed to sparkle with relief. James assured him he was unhurt in a low voice, then told him to get ready for Stark's arrival.

"Right," Artie had said and bent to press his face against Jim's arm, as West slumped back to the ground. The ferocity of his sobs shook Jim's whole body, and he almost risked telling him not to overdo it. Something niggled at the edges of his dreaming mind, something not quite right.

Before Jim could figure out what it was, the scene shifted on him. With the seamless fluidity of dreams, he stood once again at the beginning, holding Artie's gun as Gordon stepped forth with the rifle. The muzzle of the gun rose to eye him

malevolently as he silently cried foul to the heavens. Then the deafening blast came and the world tilted off its axis.

James looked stupidly down at the blossom of red spreading over the shirt which had not been his until he woke in Paradox. The pain hammered into his chest a moment later and this time, when he fell, it was no act. Again he lay, listening to Artie's approach, but this time knew, with the illogic of dreaming, that he was dead. When Artie collapsed like an unstrung marionette next to him and took his arm in a grip of steel, he could not turn and give the lie to his pretense. He tried; oh, how he tried, but though he could hear and see everything, he could not move or speak.

Artemus pulled James into his lap, cradling him against his chest. His sobs shook them both, his tears washing over Jim's face, contrarily burning like fire. He held James West with the tenderness of a young mother, and the ferocity of Death itself. He didn't even glance up when Stark and his men arrived; did not, in this permutation, swear his hatred at them. He was aware of no one else. Artemus Gordon cried and rocked the lifeless body of his best friend until they put a bullet through his brain.

Jim woke gasping and trembling, covered in a cold sweat. Before he'd even fought his way out of the shroud of sleep, warm security reached out and enfolded him. By the time he opened his eyes, his sobbing breath was already beginning to calm.

He found himself cuddled against Artemus. A strong arm snugly enclosed his shoulders, pulling him close against the security of Artie's warm chest. The steady rise and fall of the ribcage under his cheek convinced him Gordon still slept. Asleep, Artie had reached out to protect Jim, even from his own dreams. It occurred to West, lying there waiting for his heart to stop pounding, that Artie had always taken care of him. The strong, steady beat of Artie's heart lulled Jim's fears, relaxing him against his friend's sturdy frame.

When he felt less shaky, James sought back through his dream to that moment at the end of the first part, comprised purely of memory, when his subconscious had screamed that something was not right. Identifying what felt wrong in any given scenario was one of the talents which made Jim such a superb agent.

He'd told Artemus he was unhurt and suggested they prepare for Stark's entrance onto the scene. Artie had agreed and set about putting on a show. He was good at that. A master of disguise, Artemus Gordon could compel belief in a thousand different voices, mannerisms, personas. Jim occasionally worried that he might not recognize his partner the next time he met him. The characters he created were so complete, so full of life, they constantly startled James. Faking some sobs, a few tears, the anguish of having killed a man "like a brother" to him, was child's play in comparison. So why did something feel wrong about it?

Some sobs, a few tears ...

A few tears ...

His sleeve was wet. Artie had pressed his face into Jim's sleeve and pretended to cry his eyes out. But his sleeve was wet. Pretended tears didn't soak through heavy cloth. Shock stole Jim's breath. How long? How long had Artemus felt that way? And how could he not have known?

Truthfully, he was not in the practice of noticing such things. *And what was there to notice*, a cold logical voice from somewhere inside scoffed. Well, that Artie loved him. *Oh, really? Is that how he feels, James boy, or merely how you want him to feel?* He cried, Jim protested silently, he cried over me. *A man can't cry for the death of a friend?* Yes, but... But he knew I was alive by then. *Tears come in many colors, West; relief is one of them.* Still... Still and all, if all he feels is friendship, why then this inability to let me out of his sight? More than a day later, he foregoes badly needed rest to sit and watch me sleep. The cruel voice seemed to have nothing to say to this.

Jim breathed in deeply, taking Artie's scent into his lungs and holding it there. He smelled nice, a sharp, clean, spicy kind of scent. And he was warm; James basked in the warmth, the close

embrace of Artie's arm. His skin was soft, the tender bud of a nipple against Jim's cheek especially so. Jim dreamily turned his head until his lips brushed the satin nub. Suddenly desirous of the taste of him, his lips parted to tenderly enclose the nipple, tongue questing forward to lap at it. Artemus tasted good too. Jim closed his eyes to better concentrate.

He didn't at first notice the hand shifting from his shoulder up into his hair. Even when a firm grip was taken on the dark locks, Jim ignored it in favor of the tantalizing taste. When the hand tangled in his hair began to pull him away, he growled low in his throat, wresting his head free to return to Artie's chest.

"Jim, no..." It took a minute for Artie's hoarse pleading to penetrate West's distraction. "Stop, Jim, please. Wake up."

He lifted his head, taking in Artie's nearly frantic expression with an affectionate grin. "I am awake, Artie. I have been all along." He rubbed his head against the hand which had finally slacked its grip on his hair.

"But..."

"Don't tell me you didn't like it." He brushed his thumb teasingly over Artie's other nipple, which stood out as taunt and needy as the one he had suckled. Artemus gaped at him, looking about ready to ask him who he was and what he'd done with James West. He grinned and leaned down to kiss Artie tenderly. "Artemus Gordon at a loss for words? Now I've seen everything!"

"Jim, do you know what you're doing?" Artie managed after a stunned moment. Though his tone was as perfectly neutral as if they were discussing an assignment in the staid confines of the parlor, his arms had wrapped themselves tightly around Jim's waist.

"I should certainly hope so!" Drawn back to the dark honey taste of his mouth, Jim took Artie's lips in another kiss. He lingered long enough, this time, for Artemus to begin returning the pleasure.

"Oh god, Jim..." Artie whispered after they separated for breath. "I never expected..."

"I'm sorry, Artie." Jim rolled them both to their sides, where he could cuddle his friend closer to his chest. "Can you forgive me for being so blind?" His lips conquered Gordon's again before he could frame a reply. None seemed necessary after that. James ran his fingers lightly down Artie's side and over his hip to press warmly against the bandages around his thigh. "Does it hurt?"

"Not anymore, James. Not anymore." Artemus laughed softly, for the sheer joy of being alive, and the unexpected pleasure of being in the arms of the man he loved. Jim's arms pressed him close and he snuggled his head under the strong chin. Though large callused hands traced gently here and there over his body, James seemed content to simply lie there. "Jim, aren't you...?"

"Another time, Artie. When you're not hurt." His arms tightened, pressing the most precious treasure of his life close enough to feel his heartbeat. "For now, I just want to hold you."

It was then Artemus Gordon realized it was to be love between them. He had long settled for friendship and, when Jim unexpectedly made the overture, been willing to accept whatever scraps of physical pleasure might be thrown him. This was more than he'd ever dared dream.

"It's almost too bad we can't thank Stark," he murmured after a moment, drowsy contentment coloring his rich voice. Jim laughed softly.

"Go to sleep, Artie."

FORESHADOWING

by *Kate McChesney*

He awoke suddenly, heart racing. Unsure and nerves on edge he swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up, flicking the light on. He bent over double, took several deep breaths and then straightened, trying to calm his senses and bring his heartbeat down. After a few minutes he succeeded.

At the edge of his mind, in the fast fading shadows, was a visual imprint of a tall blonde man, striding purposefully toward him, arms outstretched. The expression on the blonde's face was not threatening, just the opposite in fact. It was lit with joy. His heart skipped a beat in disappointment as the image faded from his mind to that place all sweet dreams dwelt. The hollow feeling that possessed him then brought a lump to his throat and he threw himself back on the bed.

For a long time he lay like that, staring at the ceiling. But eventually exhaustion overcame his racing mind, shutting down all thought and he slept — this time dreamlessly.

"Shit... overslept again." Dave Starsky jumped from the comfort of his bed. He grabbed his pants from the chair and struggled quickly into them, cursing. "I'm late. Damn." Being a police officer was all he had ever wanted to do and he didn't want to screw it up. It was his first day at the Police Academy and it wouldn't do to be late. He decided to shower in the locker room. Whistling, he grabbed his duffel bag and raced out the door.

FILLING IN THE SPACES

BY DVS

Garak had found that having a reputation as a spy meant that he got very few opportunities to actually spy. Not in the traditional way. When he was near, conversations closed down in his vicinity, and voices lowered even when the subject being discussed was the price of a meal at Quark's. So he was rather enjoying his meal in the replimat one day because the people on all sides of him were strangers - strangers who did not feel the automatic impulse to whisper, but talked in normal voices. If one had to have a meal alone, it might as well be one with a little entertainment provided.

He had listened to two recently arrived businessmen discuss the problems of docking fees here on DS9 and he had to work to keep himself from nodding in agreement. If the docking fees were just a little lower, the profit margin would soon account for the difference as the commerce increased. The import and docking fees were what made doing business here on the station so chancy. It was the reason Garak did so much of his own designing and why people brought clothing in for alterations rather than be forced to pay the high import fee on new items. Garak sat wondering if lower docking fees would help his business. Sales would be up, but alterations might drop. An interesting exercise, and Garak enjoyed the first part of his meal all the more for having the opportunity to hear the arguments. He did so enjoy a good discussion!

It was only with a minor sense of regret that he saw the two leave. He tried to focus on the conversation behind him, but it was only a Bajoran couple arguing about their mothers. It was obviously an old argument, neither well-said or, as far as he could tell, in any way productive. He advocated a divorce and some peace for everyone, but of course did not venture to say so.

He was glad when the table the business had abandoned was taken up by a pair of young Human males. Ever since he had met Dr. Bashir, Garak had an interest in things Human. What a strange, varied, unpredictable species they were!

And some of them had no taste. Both of these young men ordered vegi-burgers and fries and that vile stuff called cola. Then they sat, in silence. The sort of silence which could be sliced. Garak risked a look. Yes, there was anger on both faces, and a stubborn set to the jaws. Oh? This could be interesting. Garak took a very small bite of his creamed artichoke - now there was a decent Human invention - and settled down to listen.

The one with the yellow hair broke first.

"How could you?" A simple accusation, simply put. Garak approved of it.

"It wasn't my fault!" The shorter one. Garak consulted his excellent memory. Broad shoulders, dark eyes, dark hair. Regular features - he was probably considered good-looking by his peers.

The other was striking in appearance, but lacked refinement. And he slouched. He draw attention to himself. Garak didn't really approve of the cut of his jumpsuit. "Whose fault was it, then?"

"Look, he was an old friend. We went out and had a few drinks, we ended up in bed together. It was no big thing." The blond shrugged.

If it was no big thing to him, it was certainly so to his companion, who leaned forward and said, "Just what's a 'big thing' to you, then? Randy, we're married - or have you forgotten?"

Married? Garak risked another glimpse of the two. Surely he hadn't made a mistake? He blinked. Those

were definitely both men. Even allowing for cultural differences and racial differences....

"Yes, I know we're married. I love you. It's just that I...."

"Got drunk. Haven't you heard of synthale?" the first said in disgust.

"He was buying. I thought it **was** a synth. Look it was Branden. You know him, he...."

"Oh, I know him. I thought he was my friend, too. Looks like I was wrong!"

"You weren't wrong! No! Clay, it was...I don't know how to describe it. He just seemed to need someone."

"So he picked you?" Clay certainly had a nice line in sarcasm, Garak noted.

"I was all there was at the time! And it wasn't like we did anything. Let me get it out in the open right now. We did not fuck. We did not suck. No parts of my body went into his, or visa versa! We just...we were together on his bed, and I had my arm around his shoulders, I mean, he'd been crying, for god's sake, and he was hurting! And when he stopped he sort of...forgot who he was with or something, he was just...just moving against my leg and I...let him. He got off, I didn't. He **needed** it."

Clay said, "What about my needs? My need to feel secure in my relationship?"

"It was wrong, I know that. But it just didn't seem like it at the time."

Garak usually had the extremely useful ability - for a spy - of being able to listen and think at the same time. Tonight, the ability abandoned him utterly. It had taken a moment or two for the words to sink in, and then his entire thought processes ground to a halt.

Fuck?

Was the universal translator working? It must be. But the concept - fuck? Male? But that meant that, for Human Males, a full penetration of some sort was possible. Only one place came to mind where such a thing could be accomplished. What an...untidy concept. Imagine coming up with such an idea! Although, now that he thought of it, there were certain wild rumors about an all-male Bajoran terrorist group, back in the days of occupation. He had dismissed them at the time as exaggerations. But...

Fragments of the conversation he had been eavesdropping on penetrated his fog.

"You said you loved me...."

"What does love mean to you? Nothing!"

As the discussion seemed to have regressed, he put his mind back to the fascinating concept of actually making love to a male.

Married?

Were there children involved? How?

What sort of culture allowed such a wide definition of marriage? What other deviations from what Cardassia perceived as the norm did the Humans have? What could be stranger than that?

What could be more fascinating than that?

And what did Dr. Bashir think of that?

Ah. Garak examined the possibility which had appeared, full-grown, in his mind. The ramifications of a few facts had re-arranged his thinking dramatically in only a few seconds. For if Human males could have relations with other males, and if a certain Cardassian had an interest in a certain Human male....

The image was so clear, so startling. So erotic! Just imagine that slender, beautiful young man opened to him, writhing under him, sighing out his name in the heart of his pleasure. For there must be pleasure, else why would it be done? These two unhappy young men spoke of love, after all.

And marriage.

What if that were a requirement? Marriage? Garak, who had not seriously considered matrimony in almost thirty years, gave it a moment's sincere thought. Reluctantly, he acknowledged to himself that it was very unlikely that Julian Bashir would seek a permanent relationship with an aging and alien tailor. No doubt, when the time came, that young man would settle down with a woman of his own race, produce two quite nice children, and

move...move back to Earth. DS9 was really no place to raise a family, although it improved almost daily.

But, just for a moment, imagine it. Coming home from the shop to Bashir's laughing eyes and a warm embrace. Intimate dinners for two, following by long evenings in bed. And in bed! He could not help it, his mind conjured up that same graphic imagine. Julian Bashir, accepting into his body the iron hard shaft of his friend, his lover. *Lover.*

What would that feel like? To have him in his arms, to have him offering such a personal and intimate service...

Which he could not offer in return.

He almost laughed out loud. What could he offer to compare with that?

Oh, there was his mouth. Cardassians practiced several variations of oral sex, even between males. However, it was usually a case of one male dominating the other and making use of a mouth because nothing else was available. Garak had never heard of two men who mutually gave each other that intimacy. But it was quite possible.

Except, in this case, for the small little fact that Julian Bashir seemed so devoted to the female sex. The race of his partner seemed of little importance, but he seemed to be attracted to very feminine women.

Hopeless. But - what could a poor spy do? Once the idea was in his brain, it seemed impossible to pry it out. Garak stayed, listening to the long and painful reconciliation of the two Humans at the next table, trying to snatch the facts of the matter from their emotional discourse, until they finished their meal. He watched them leave the replimat arm in arm, knowing, from the way their heads were together, that they would go to their room or their ship and fall into bed.

Garak left just after them, following them out to the Promenade but keeping a reasonable distance behind them. He wanted to see how others reacted to the men.

But there was no reaction. Not from the Humans. Either it was an accepted practice, or the people did not know what they were seeing. Several Bajorans stared, and an Andorian dipped antennae in their direction politely. Nothing else.

Quite interesting. Garak slowed as the two men stepped into the lift for the habitat ring, and went on to take the next one. He went to his room, where he sat down at once at the computer terminal. He wiggled his fingers to loosen them and set to work. Here was where all the true work of a spy went on - at the computer console. One did not even have to control the truth if one could control the reporting of it. And one of the ironies of it was that the Federation system, designed for the use of almost any type of sentient being, was so simple. Their data bases were so often open, completely available. It was but the work of a moment to find his way to the information he wanted.

It surprised him. It seemed that almost every race in the galaxy practiced some form of single sex pairings in one form or another. Humans, according to the statistics he found, did not make it a common practice. One point seven five percent pair exclusively with their own sex. Another three percent were biologically inclined to make bisexuality a chosen life style.

Ah. It was, of course, just his luck. Five chances out of a hundred that Julian Bashir would welcome the advances of another male. Assuming that he had no other objections to pairing with Garak. It was quite possible Bashir's sense of beauty and his desire were not triggered by non-status aliens who had reached middle age.

There was a video clip, an animation which managed to be clinical and detached as it described the techniques and approaches used in this type of mating. Garak watched it five times. Then he was forced to leave the computer for his bed, to take care of a small problem which had arisen. Sex, even that with his own hands, always left him relaxed. He lay on his bed, naked, his hand cupped over his now lax flesh, and day-dreamed about a Dr. Bashir who begged for his touch, who sighed and called out under the heavy weight of a certain Cardassian. And, because it was his dream and he was considering the impossible anyway, he made the setting the luxurious home he had once had on Cardassia Prime with the huge bed, and he imagined that the one who partnered him was madly in love with him. What were two more impossibilities added to the first, after all.

Julian Bashir was also in bed, also clutching a certain part of his anatomy, also dreaming of carnal relations with his Cardassian friend. Really, it was getting

ridiculous, because it had reached a point where he was unable to hold any other fantasy in his mind, when he couldn't get off unless it was that one particular partner he visualized.

Only with a real person could he set the fantasy aside. He had actually increased the number of sexual encounters he was having after he discovered he had formed some sort of interest in Garak. Which struck even Bashir as atypically perverse. Also, of course, he was trolley only for women. That was odd, too, in a way.

But when had he ever followed the expected path?

He sighed, and spent some time, once again, trying to think of a way to broach the subject to Garak. Some way which could preserve their friendship, should Garak find the whole idea just too bizarre. After all, some Humans found it shockingly odd, so why not this poor Cardassian? Not that he thought anything would really shock Garak. And not that he really thought he would be rejected. Lots of people found the idea interesting, and experimented, spending a night or two with him.

But almost no one stayed. Not, anyway for the right reasons. Not because they loved him as a person. But only because he was a novelty. He had no illusions. Around a dozen bars across the galaxy, there was a man or woman telling the story of the night they spent with a doctor -

Which was fine. He didn't care. But he didn't think he could stand it if he had a night or two with Garak, and then -

Still looking for love? Someone who accepts you as your are?

There?

Sometimes he wished he had not been so curious. Or that he not chosen that particular path. He had stopped hoping that his father would accept him, stopped trying to please him. And just that once, he had done something guaranteed to enrage him. It had felt good, at the time. Good to, just once, to have the upper hand. To let a few words fall and have the old man speechless - with shock, and then rage. It was a good thing he had just graduated from medical school at that point. His father had been so angry, that he would have cut his only son off without with a cent. Bashir had shown him that there was something worse than having a son who missed being first in his class by one small point. Having Julian **choose** to take men into his bed, in exactly that way....

It still made Julian smile. A poor, hard-jawed smile, but a smile.

Well, he had told his father, and he would, eventually tell Garak. The right moment would come.

It came sooner than Bashir expected.

It all started in Quark's.

Bashir had been waiting for Dax, who had arranged to met him for drinks. Sweet Dax. Now, **she** understood. She'd been wonderful. Julian didn't mind at all that she had been one of the people who had bedded him once and then not again. They understood each other now, and he knew that she wasn't the one he really wanted. She had been - fun, incredibly accepting, and ...well, fun! She had become a good friend.

She was late. Bashir started on his second drink and sat idly looking over the crowd. He didn't see the Klingon coming, only knew that he was there when a hand came down hard on his shoulder, causing his drink to spill.

"I've heard about you," the Klingon leered. "You're the doctor."

"And there are severe penalties on this station for abusing the physician." Carefully, Bashir dropped his shoulder and pulled out of the grip.

"Hahh! I wouldn't hurt you! Come on, I want to go to bed!" the Klingon said, in what he may have thought a whisper. It could be heard two tables away.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not interested. I'm waiting for someone," Bashir said politely.

"Forget him - or her!" The Klingon leaned forward. His breath definitely needed freshening. "I'll pay you," he offered.

I don't sell," Bashir said coldly. He never had. He never would.

"Then I'll take it for free - and thank you for the bargain!" A quick move and his large arm was across

Bashir's shoulders.

"Perhaps you didn't hear?" The new voice was mild and soft, but some note there caused the Klingon's head to whip up. A Cardassian stood before them. How had he managed to come so close so quickly?

The Klingon did not let himself be intimidated. After all, it was not a big Cardassian, and it was older. "Go find your own bed-warmer for the night," he growled.

"Ah, but I'm afraid you have your arm around my spouse. You can see why I might have an objection to the procedure," the Cardassian said, his voice still calm and polite. But that tone was beginning to bother the Klingon. Something about it reminded him of General Kwan at his most dangerous. General Kwan was his own personal standard by which he measured danger.

"You married this?" the Klingon asked, and froze, as if he suddenly thought perhaps this might have been a mistake. An insult....

"He pleases me. You don't. Why don't you quietly go about your business? After all, it would be so unpleasant if this matter came to the attention of your father."

That seemed to startle the other, and with a sharp look, he took his arm from Bashir's shoulders, turned and strode out of the bar.

"Well, thank you, but you didn't have to do that. Quark had already buzzed for Security." Bashir sat down, trying to ignore the stares coming from all sides.

Garak sat down across from him and said, "It was no trouble."

"What was that about his father?"

"Judiciously applied psychology. Klingons are always worried about what their fathers will think. He seems to have a guilty conscience." Garak smiled faintly.

People were still staring. Maybe some of them had heard Garak's rather startling claim. "Spouse?" he said.

"Another fine word they respond to. I hope you don't mind that I made the claim?"

"Well, I was a little startled," Bashir admitted.

"Did you know I did not even know that Humans could marry a member of their own sex until recently?" Garak asked casually.

"Technically, some of us still can't. It depends on what sector or colony you are from on Earth. It's legal to marry a member of your own sex in all but two of them."

"I take it if you happen to be born in the wrong sector...."

"You move."

"It seems like a simple solution." Garak paused. "I don't always trust simple solutions."

"It's hard on families." Bashir was staring into his empty glass.

"Dax seems to have been delayed," Garak observed.

"How did you know I was....never mind. Yes, she seems to have been delayed." He lifted his head and looked around. Glances skittered away. His con badge chirped. "Bashir, here."

"Dax. I'm sorry, Julian, but I won't be able to meet you at Quark's. Maybe tomorrow?" He voice did not carry far. Garak had to lean forward to hear it.

"Tomorrow is fine, Jadzia, thanks." Bashir managed to keep his disappointment from her, but not from Garak.

"So. May I buy my spouse a drink?" Garak asked, lifting a brow-ridge droopy.

"No, thank you, Garak. I think I'll just take a walk on the Promenade and then call it a night," Bashir said, standing.

Garak rose as well. "I'll walk along with you, then. If you don't mind?"

Bashir smiled slightly. "I never mind your company, Garak."

"You can tell me more about some of these odd Human customs of yours. You know, Cardassia had nothing like that."

"What, single-sex pairings? Is there a reason why not?" Bashir asked as they made their way to the door.

"Strict custom and, I believe, some physical differences." Garak paused as a couple going into Quark's passed too closely.

"So you've never gone to bed with a man?" Bashir asked, when others were out of earshot.

"No." Although it could not be said that he was totally without experience in that area. He'd put his mouth to a few problems when he was younger.

"Do you want to?" Bashir asked, wetting his lips nervously.

"Are you offering?" Garak hoped he kept the emotions out of his voice.

"If...you won't be too put off?" Bashir asked nervously.

"I don't think so. Are you a good teacher?"

Bashir laughed a bit. "I don't know."

Garak said, "One thing does make me nervous. I can't reciprocate. It seems...unfair. One sided."

"Don't let that worry you. Almost no one can, after all." Bashir had turned left toward his quarters.

After the barest hesitation, Garak followed. Part of his mind was still considering what Bashir had said, not sure it made sense. The rest of his mind was caught up in the wonderfully impossible thing which had happened - the doctor had invited him into his bed! The odds had fallen in his favor. Julian seemed to be in that small percentage of Humans who could and did bed members of their own sex. The what and how of it intrigued Garak, but apprehension stalked him, too. What if he could not please his friend? What if it tattered their friendship? And would it seem too fastidious if he asked for a sheath before putting himself in - there? The entire idea still seemed a little odd to him. Fortunately, he was a very flexible thinker.

The doctor's quarters were all blue and gray. Garak studied the room as he stepped in. Old instincts made him automatically look for exits, for the places where danger might be hidden.

"May I offer you a drink?" Bashir asked. He almost kept his voice steady.

"And lose some nuance of this night? Oh, no," Garak said.

"Ah. Then...how does a Cardassian begin an evening of...this type?"

"How does a Human?" Garak countered, moving closer.

"With a kiss." Bashir turned and took a step towards Garak, meeting him in the middle of the room. His hand came up to Garak's shoulder, Garak slipped his own arm around Bashir's waist and pulled him close. His head bent, he waited for Bashir to make the move which would bring their lips together. Quite hesitantly, Bashir inclined his head enough to allow the most delicate touch of mouth on mouth. Breath mingled. He pulled back, then approached again, this time letting their lips rest together lightly.

Garak lasted three seconds before he took a tighter hold on Bashir, pulled him against him, hard, and turned the kiss into something with substance.

They parted with Bashir's laughter between them. "I knew you'd be like that," Bashir exulted.

"Like what?"

"Strong. A little impatient. And an excellent kisser," Bashir said, letting his tongue run along his lips. "Aggressive - it makes me wonder. You do know that just because I'm this way - it doesn't make me any less of a man. It doesn't change what I am - and what I want - as a man."

"It's a man I want in my bed," Garak assured him. "Or in this case, your bed. It's you I so unexpectedly want."

"Unexpectantly?"

"I assure you, most unexpected. But, also rest assured, the discovery was a most pleasant surprise." Garak leaned to take Bashir's mouth again, the kisses they traded rapidly becoming as necessary as breathing. And then Bashir changed the angle of his body, thrust his hard groin into Garak's equally hard one, and gave Garak sufficient reason to stop taking kisses and start to give attention to other things. His hands came up to hold Bashir's head, to trace the line

of the ears and the place where the neck sloped down to the shoulder.

"Take this off," Bashir suggested, his fingers running along the top seam of Garak's green tunic. Garak paused, deliberately took the time for another kiss, before he lifted his hands to his own disrobing.

"Oh? You can't be commanded?" Bashir asked, from under a lifted brow.

"I could be," Garak said. "What would you command me to do?" His tunic, double layered, was now in his hand, and his torso was exposed to the cool air. The ridges of his neck lifted and stiffened in response to the cold - and perhaps to the admiring look in Bashir's eyes as well.

"To let me touch?" Bashir asked, but did not wait for permission to put his hands on the solid chest. His fingers splayed, and then he sent them roaming. There's so much to explore," the doctor murmured. He seemed to be getting a great deal of tactile pleasure from running his fingertips along the uneven surface of Garak's skin.

Garak, with a light touch, began to work loose the fastening on the Federation uniform, and he would have thought the other too absorbed to even notice, but for the fact that he leaned forward at just the right time to aid Garak in bringing the cloth down. Garak pulled until the long torso was completely exposed in his eyes, and the cloth was hung right on the points of Bashir's hips, with the first few wisps of pubic hair showing and the swell of his sex still hidden - but just barely. Garak paused to stare at the chest, to let his hands learn what the skin felt like over the hard muscle. Smooth as silk.

Garak smiled. If they were to be compared to fabric, his own skin was more like the nubby, practical weaves of his own world. And perhaps he had been working too hard, if he could have this delight within his grasp and be thinking only of cloth!

'Will we do it here?" Garak asked.

"No. Come - you've never seen my bed, have you?" Bashir said, taking hold of his uniform at the waist to keep it from falling as he walked. He turned and led the way, and Garak could only stare at him. Like walking art, the unclothed back, shoulders to the first rise of the buttocks naked and smooth, the color of coffee with too much cream, and absolutely without blemish. One could imagine it in marble, polished to perfection by a sculptor's loving touch.

Polished smooth by the touch of lovers? Garak frowned at the very thought of others having this delight. He thought of the Klingon and knew he had been too kind. How could a ham-handed lout like that even presume to aspire to...this!

"What do you think of it?" Bashir said, when they reached the alcove which held the bed. He took the opportunity to take off his boots, and Garak followed his example at once.

"Is this a bed?" It was on a platform, as Cardassian beds were, but this one was set low to the ground. The bed was round, set against a curve of the wall so that the wall formed a type of headboard. A bolster or low padded wall went completely around the perimeter of the mattress, and inside there were piles of pillow and blankets.

"I always wanted one - this is the Deltan style. Last went I went and blew my entire month's pay on it," Bashir said.

"And had to pay a luxury tax on it, too, I suppose!" Garak moved around, looking at it. It seemed sturdy enough. And roomy enough. And there were intriguing possibilities in those sides. He wondered is Bashir had brought others to this bed - or if he were the first.

"Yes, but it isn't as heavy as it looks - I didn't have to pay the weight adjustment."

"Ah, but is it comfortable?" Garak asked.

"You'll find out. Garak, I like my partners to spend the night. Would you consider it?" Bashir asked.

"How very generous of you," Garak murmured with a smile. Partners. Others. He didn't like being reminded that Bashir had others. He walked up to Bashir, hooked one finger into the edge of the precariously draped uniform and...tugged. It came down willingly. "How beautiful," Garak said, frankly staring at the genitals as they were revealed. It was a polite phrase. He would have said it even if it were not true. But, oh, it was true.

"Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, they say. And you are hiding yours. Come on," Bashir said, stepping forward to send busy fingers flying over Garak's waistband. He knelt, pulling the pants down

slowly, his face on the level with Garak's crotch, so that he had the very best view as the trousers were lowered.

"I'm afraid Cardassians have no claim to beauty here - but it is practical," Garak said, looking down at the dark head bent to inspect him.

"I'm just right. I know it's not considered correct to express an opinion, but this is just how I like them - thick and not too long." Bashir reached out to touch, and the organ became thicker and longer at once, causing him to laugh.

"It's acceptable?" Garak want to make sure. "It won't be uncomfortable for you?"

"It's perfect!" Bashir stood up, taking hold of Garak's hand to help himself up.

The Human organ, longer and thinner, was lifting slightly, and Garak reached out to take hold of it. Treasure in the palm of his hand, treasure that he had not thought would be his. His hands explored, but his eyes stayed on Bashir's face, entranced with the play of emotion and the clearly displayed enjoyment.

Bashir pulled away and stepped over the low padded rim of the bed, settling down amid the pillows. He called the lights a little lower and lounged back, saying, "Aren't you going to join me?"

Cautiously, Garak stepped over the edge, but the surface was quite firm and he knelt, enjoying the various textures of the blankets and pillows against his skin.

"Oh, look at your thighs," Bashir marveled, running his hands along the bunched muscle. "You're in better shape than I suspected - and since you are a tailor and display your body exactly as you think it should be displayed, you must not want anyone to know," Bashir commented, settling his hand over the curve of the knee.

"Not everyone has Starfleet for a tailor. There are no secrets in those uniforms, are there?" Garak asked.

Bashir only laughed and went on fondling the hard planes of the Cardassian's thighs - until he leaned too close and had his mouth captured by clever Cardassian lips. Bashir's fingers kneaded lightly at the corded muscles as Garak took hold of Bashir's shoulder for balance, then shifted to a better grip and pulled the Human against him.

"Umm!" Bashir paused to make the sound of appreciation, and then became the aggressor, taking the next kiss as he pushed forward, pressing Garak back into the pile of pillows. Leaning over Garak, he began exploring the Cardassian's face with his lips and his fingers, finding tiny ridges to kiss and lick, and lingering for several minutes on that depression right on the tip of Garak's chin. It seemed ticklish, and Garak pulled back his head - which only left his throat exposed. Bashir willingly began to investigate the dips and bumps there, his tongue licking over the pulse points, his lips discovering new places to touch every moment.

There was so much to discover - the small lines of - well, you couldn't call them scales, for they were made of skin, textured, thickened skin - which topped the intriguing neck cording, and the hollows beside that cording. Long valleys for the tongue and nose to discover together. Dips and rises on a miniature scale, paths to follow which led to even more territory. And all the while, strong hands were stroking his own back and sides, learning much, pleasing him much. They paused on the rise of his buttocks, cupping here, then rubbing along the high curve. Flirting with the crease between the two halves, barely touching, but returning to it almost at once.

Bashir brought his hand down to Garak's penis, noticing at once that it was filled and straining up with laudable enthusiasm.

"Um. Ready so soon?" Bashir teased.

"Yes. But...you must show me...how this is done," Garak said hoarsely. All he wanted was to thrust in, but surely it must be done a certain way, a careful insertion at the right angle. He did not want to bring pain - or to appear inept and clumsy. He turned to what he knew, taking Bashir's lips in another kiss as they rolled onto their sides, facing each other, hands now growing bolder. Bashir was gently pulling on the Cardassian cock, a regular, light touch which was not quite hard enough and had Garak pushing his hips forward, pleading for more.

Garak, distracted by this need burning in him, managed to send his hands forward to touch Bashir as intimately. He held the balls, wonderfully free things, unlike the scrotum which was webbed securely to the base of the Cardassian penis. Then he dared to move his hand back, seeking the place behind where the

anus was - and he froze, for just behind the balls was...was.....

He jerked his hand away, his eyes snapped open and in a moment he had Bashir pressed to the mattress. "What from across the hells is....that!?" Garak gasped out.

Bashir struggled to sit up, but was only able to lift himself up a few inches - the Cardassian muscle and mass combining to effectively keep him trapped. "What's wrong?" he asked. "Garak, let me up, you're hurting me! What's wrong?" he asked again.

Garak threw himself away, sitting back on his knees, hands spread and clutching his own thighs. His chest was heaving, his hair had lost the smooth perfection of line, and his eyes were dark with questions.

Bashir pulled himself up to a sitting position, and said, "But...didn't you know? I thought you knew!"

"Exactly what...did you think I knew?" Garak demanded.

"About me. You had to know! Garak, it's the worst kept secret on the station! Everybody knows!"

"Everybody...knows...what?"

"That I'm a sast - well, that's the slang term, of course. A surgical hermaphrodite. Garak, I thought that was why you wanted to go to bed with me!"

"I thought you were," what was the term, "bisexual," Garak said, struggling to control his voice, which threatened to give away exactly how shaken he was.

"Well, I am, but I'm this, too," Bashir piled some pillows behind him, spread his thighs and let Garak have full view of his paired sexuality.

"Surgical?" Garak fastened on that idea, if belatedly. His brain did not seem to be processing words at all well. His heart was still pounding, his breathing still rapid.

"I got it the week I got my surgical permit. My friend Jon and I passed the test the same day. We went out to celebrate. We'd been talking about the members of our class who got tattoos to commemorate the occasion. We had a fantastic dinner and then went out to a nice pub. We were bemoaning the fact that here we were, with brand new permits and not a surgical assignment in sight! We weren't drunk - not at all. He came up with the idea, and for some reason it just sounded - so reasonable! It was a fad at the time, you know, among Humans. It was reversible, so a good many men were giving it a try. We knew we would probably be doing a few, it was common enough surgery, and we decided, well, we'd do it. He'd do it for me, I'd do it for him. We got a friend of ours to sign the declaration of intent permits - now **he** was drunk! - and when the three day waiting period was up, we did it."

"You carved...that...into your body?"

"A type of vagina, yes. Jon did. I got the better score on the test, so we decided I would do Jon first. It was easy, it's template surgery. Then, three days after that, he did mine."

"Deliberately. Why? Did you want to be a woman?" Garak asked, still shaken and confused.

"No. It has nothing to do with that! It's about expanding your sexuality, your dimensions. It's not about changing sex. We only made the one change. We didn't want to **be** women, we just wanted to have some of their options. I didn't want the breasts, and neither did Jon."

Garak did not want to think about Julian with breasts. "And this was a fad?" Garak blinked. Fads he understood, the changing vagaries of fashion. But this was beyond fashion as he knew it. To add, or take away, from the body, to alter it so casually....

"You could call it that. Garak, I still can't believe you didn't know! With your reputation - everyone thinks you're a spy, Garak! Spies are supposed to know all the common gossip!"

"Common gossip?"

"Well, no one says anything to my face, but I know it gets talked about. Why did you think that Klingon was coming on to me at Quark's?' Bashir asked.

"I thought he was seeking an evening with a man!"

"He was - but you thought he wanted a homosexual encounter? Oh, not him - he just wanted a one-sided walk on the wild side. That's the worst of this, you know - the people who try to lure you into bed only because they want to try something different. And, I have to admit, sometimes if the person is right, it can be fun." Bashir rubbed his eyes and said again, "I can't believe you didn't know!"

"I had only just learned...about the Human male's ability to - mate each other. That was all that I was hoping for. That you would give me that. Even though I could not give you the same in return." Garak shifted his position, sitting flat on the mattress, trying to relax.

Bashir sighed, and confessed, "I looked into that once, you know. When I first entertained the notion of going to bed with you. I admit I was disappointed with what I learned. You couldn't even get a finger up a Cardassian ass, must less a cock. I was...disappointed."

"And when I first heard of the Human practice of anal...sex, I was rather startled to think that anyone would want to place themselves into that sort of...environment," Garak confessed.

"But you considered it anyway?" Bashir asked.

"I'm sure I would have considered worse than that - if it would have given me time in your bed. You have always had a fascination for me. I don't know why," Garak said, half to himself.

"And I was attracted to you. But I was too tired, uncertain of you, at first, to suggest it. You didn't seem interested in me and you...well, you kept me off balance. Every time I became comfortable enough to think of suggesting it, something would come up, and I'd postpone it."

"But are you still interested?" Garak wanted to know. What he would do if Bashir said no, he did not even want to contemplate.

"A better question is, are you?" Bashir reached out a hand, resting it on Garak's knee.

"How could you doubt it?" Garak asked, shifting, leaning closer, his interest...and his erection...more than obvious. As he moved forward, Bashir leaned back, retreating before the suddenly very male aggression Garak was displaying. Face to face, Bashir could not see what was happening below his waist, but he felt the questing hand, delicately investigating everything which was between his legs. Fingers sliding into him, exotically un-smooth. "Are you sure there is enough room here?" Garak asked, fingers moving.

"More room than the other place you were thinking of having," Bashir assured him, and stopped to sigh as Garak's fingers were taken away. Garak was moving over him, and Bashir reached out a hand to take hold of the strong penis with its smoky grey head and the ring of bumps, much like Garak's eye ridges, which spiraled up the length of it. Quite carefully, he shifted his weight and guided Garak into position.

Garak paused, leaned forward, and with his mouth on Bashir's, he let gravity and his weight pull him down inside. It was a slow sinking, for the Human was tight.

Garak took his mouth away to whisper, "I'm sorry. Perhaps you weren't ready? I didn't think....." He wasn't thinking at all, had not been all night. But now he could feel the flesh around him relaxing, accommodating him. And nothing had ever felt better in his life.

"No, it's fine. I'm ready for you," Bashir reassured him. This was the point where he blessed his athletic lifestyle and his muscle tone. He wasn't exactly designed to have a man of that size between his thighs. But, oh, it felt good. He eased a hand between their bodies, adjusting where his own swollen penis rode against Garak's pebbled abdomen - and that was a unique and marvelous sensation which clamored for his attention as well!

"Tell me if I make a mistake," Garak murmured, his lips trailing over cheek, chin, shoulder, as he began his first tiny thrusts. It was as if he were forming Bashir around him, as if each move forward carved out more space for him to move into, so that each thrust could be a little harder, a little deeper, a little more ardent. And Julian! His strong arms held him, the long fingers clutching him, then stroking his back, sliding down to cup his buttocks and pull him inside, while his legs first braced, and then tried to twine around him. And the sounds he made! Gasps, and little begging words whose meaning was lost, but which were understandable none the less, and groans which came unexpectedly, falling away into sighs and murmurs and pleas for more.

Oh, yes, more, forever more!

And then there was the odd sensation of that penis riding against him, leaking tiny trails of moisture against his skin. Garak was aware of it every moment, and several times he reached between them to touch it, rub it, hold it. It was while he was holding it that Bashir's half-closed eyes widened, and then the lids fell again as his head started to thrash against the

pillow, mouth opening as he gasped for breath and for the air to make those lovely needful sounds.

Garak felt the quiver under his palm, felt the force inside gather and then release, and the dampness covered his skin and found the crevices of his fingers, cool pulses which faded away. Bashir was looking up at him, through half-closed lids with eyes that asked him if he minded, if he liked it, if he enjoyed it as much, and a dozen other questions.

So Garak kissed him, making his lips take the message without the aid of a voice, kissed him ferociously and with mad passion, while his hips, which had been temporarily stilled with the wonder of it, found their rhythm again.

"Oh, yes!" Bashir cried, opening himself. 'Oh, yes, oh...Elim! Fuck me!" He screamed the last words, his fingers turning to claws and raking down Garak's back, his own hips moving, making demands his voice echoed over and over.

Garak obeyed. He knew, as the pressure within increased and the pleasure built to heights he had never known before that he would always obey, that Julian Bashir held him with more than his body, and he did not care, cared about nothing except to stay here at the top of the wildness, stay with the divine moment which was peaking and falling away even as he strove it hold it. Garak fell with it, feeling the always satisfying release as some new sort of thunder which shook him to his bones and turned his blood to syrup and his muscles to useless strings. He collapsed on top of his lover, knowing he was too heavy, knowing that he was breathing like a dying beast and that a tiny bit of moisture was dripping from the corner of his mouth. Reduced to a drooling heap, and he did not even care except to worry if it would offend his lover. He lay, head on Julian's shoulder, as his lungs recovered and his sight and feeling and hearing came to him again. Then he knew that Julian was stroking along his back with firm and comforting strokes of his wonderful hands and soft words of praise were being murmured against his black hair, and ...

Garak forced himself up, lifting his body, separating them before ever-so-carefully lying down beside Bashir. With one arm, he gathered him close, kissing the eyes, the cheeks, the forehead, the nose and jaw in turn - and then again.

"So that's how it's supposed to be," Bashir said softly, smiling at him, and Garak smiled back.

"I haven't hurt you?' Garak asked, his voice rough. He swallowed to wet his throat. So hoarse - had he, too, screamed?

"I'm sore, but not hurt. It feels good. A funny contradiction, isn't it?"

Garak kissed him on the lips, softly, lightly. Then he did not speak, but only looked down and smiled.

"What a very - powerful man you are. I think you needed that - has it been so long?" Bashir's hands were up to Garak's face now, smoothing back the long strands of dark hair, stroking the curve of the cheek.

What answer was there to that? How long had it been since never? What he said was, "I shall want that, too, I think."

"What?" Bashir asked, his lips still turned up in that bemused smile.

"What I thought we came here for..."

Bashir laughed. "The view from the back porch? Now?"

"I'm afraid not even tonight. But I thought you should know my intentions."

"I see. Do you know why?"

"To see what other wonders I have been missing." To know there would be another time with Julian - anticipation lifted the ridges along his neck, made him arch his neck and he paused, as instinct told him to do, for his mate to notice him.

Julian noticed. Admiration, and a touch of humor, shone in his eyes. Garak did not know how much he needed that, wanted that, until it was given to him.

Exactly then, he knew he was in trouble.

Just then, he knew why and how one chose a mate for life - and knew, too, how unlikely it was that this young man would give him the future he wanted.

"What's wrong?" Bashir said.

It was a little frightening, too, that the Human should know something was wrong? Did he reveal so much, he who was a master at hiding his feelings? Much to

his surprise, he answered Bashir honestly. "I am afraid I will want too much - that you cannot give." He sighed. "And I...I am all too aware of what I can't give, in return."

"You aren't just talking about physically, are you?"

Garak smiled whimsically. "Why have only one meaning when the same words can carry two? Or three?"

"Very efficient," Bashir agreed. He was satiated, lazy with it, his hand moving idly on Garak's flank and hip.

"Thank you. And would you listen to a list of the words which I might use to describe you?"

Bashir drew an arm up under him, so that he rested on his elbow, hand against his head. "We have time," he agreed.

"Time we have - the question is, will my vocabulary fail me? Is there a word for something which is one step beyond beauty? For warmth which does not have to come in, through the skin, but can burst into existence inside at just the sound of your breath? A word for the almost-gold of your skin and the darkest amber of your eyes?"

Bashir blushed. "You...mean it," he said, wonderingly.

Yes. He meant it, and a thousand other things as well, for which there were, indeed, no words.

"Poetry..." Bashir whispered.

"Did you always want poetry?" Garak asked. "Did you never have it before? Was poetry enough to hold you? Mere words?"

Bashir gave a shy shrug and nod.

"Perhaps you don't need it. You **are** poetry, you know. You walk like you will never grow old, with an innate grace that catches the eye. Yet, it is still with you when you are sitting down. When I first saw you, years ago, you were sitting down."

"In the replimat?" Bashir asked, remembering their first meeting.

"Oh, no, before that. You were with Dax in a briefing, and I saw you as the door opened to let someone into the room. It was a meeting of some type, for the biological sciences personnel, I think. You looked nervous."

"I **was** nervous! I'd only been on the station a few hours, and I was a department head! I had no idea what I was going to say!"

"Memories." Very soon, this night, too, would be a memory. Garak wondered if he could bear it. To go back to his room, and be alone. Yet he could hardly invite himself to stay here in Bashir's quarters, in his bed, forever! Yes, if only some alien archeologist should find them, a thousand years hence, his body on top of Bashir's, and both of them dead of old age! He laughed at himself. Leaning forward, he put his mouth to Bashir's, savoring what he could still have. While his lips touched, just as Bashir opened his mouth and invited him in, Garak had an odd, fleeting fraction of thought. *Perhaps, it will be Julian's body on top of mine."*

A frightening thought, as the most simple ideas often were. For if Julian were on top, then he was on the bottom - then if the one on the bottom this time was the one with the surgical...adjustment....

Would he do that for Julian Bashir?

Would he dare do that at all?

He could well imagine the reaction of the Central Command at that news - and what was left of the Obsidian Order. Ah, but it was the type of gossip that would sweep the whole of the Cardassian Empire!

But who would ever know?

And why was he even thinking about it?

Ah, but that one was easy. He felt in debt to Julian Bashir - felt the unequal nature of their exchange. For in this he could only take, and could not give. Indeed, Bashir had three ways he could take Garak into his body, and Garak could only offer one - and that one seemed pale in comparison.

"What does it feel like?" he asked suddenly, startling Bashir so that he blinked and leaned forward - until he understood what the question was.

"Physically, or mentally?" Bashir asked.

"Both. Either. You said it was reversible surgery, after all - you must have had a reason not to reverse it."

"Besides having to travel off this station to have it done? It's funny - I thought it would feel like being...oh, all the old words. Possessed. Being taken. Being owned, dominated. I wasn't sure I liked that. But we talked to several men who'd had the change for years and they said - and it's true - that there was something quite opposite involved.. It's - holding onto your lover, in a way that's hard to describe. It's like the penis inside you is as much yours as the one attached. I take it in and I **have** it. And when I have it inside me, there are two parts to the pleasure I have, it's doubled. Partly because we adjust the prostrate for maximum pleasure," he added, with a wink.

"I don't think I have one of those," Garak remarked.

"Prostrate? You must have something that serves the same function - although it wouldn't necessarily have the same characteristics." Bashir, who had been touching Garak again, let his hand go still. "You're not thinking of...."

"No. To even consider something as radical as that, I would have to...."

"Be married," Bashir nodded sagely.

"What?" Garak asked, and then he remembered that most Humans had the option of wedding a member of their own sex. Yes, it would have to be that - a lifetime commitment, a total devotion.

Garak, who knew himself, who knew he was capable of that level of loyalty and that depth of feeling, let his sense of irony have his smile. Yes, he could almost see himself taking such giant leaps. Radical changes in mind and body, in the course of his future — these things he was capable of desiring, of obtaining.

But Julian. Dr. Bashir. Was he capable - or interested in - that type of future? A lifetime with an aging alien tailor? So few people counted that at a requisite for domestic bliss. He could imagine an affair, he could imagine months, a year. But, for some reason, he could not imagine Bashir wanting him forever.

On the other hand, the possibilities were set before him, a deck of cards with many of the faces up. The game could be played, and with a little fortune and some hard work.

And meanwhile..."I have a confession to make," Garak said, rolling closer and taking Bashir in his arms, holding him close for a hug before loosening his grip and allowing enough distance between them so that he could look into Bashir's eyes.

"Do you?" Bashir leaned forward, leaning his forehead into Bashir's eyes.

"Do you?" Bashir leaned forward, leaning his forehead against Garak's.

"I lied to you a moment ago."

"About what?" Bashir asked, showing no signs of distress at this news.

"I may have implied that I had been rendered incapable for the rest of the evening."

Bashir nodded. "So you did."

"It was, I am afraid, not the truth. The truth is, I am feeling...."

"Horny?" Bashir interjected crudely, if hopefully."

"I was going to say, recovered," Garak explained.

"How fortunate - because I was feeling recovered myself, just moments ago." Bashir was winding his arms around Garak, holding him tight.

"But I'm afraid I'm not feeling at all innovative," Garak warned.

"You want to do the exact same thing again?" Bashir asked.

"A few variations might be in order. I don't feel we've adequately explored all the territory."

"That's true. There's so much to discover. I feel that I should warn you about something," Bashir told him solemnly.

"What?" Garak asked, bringing one of Bashir's hands up to his mouth to kiss the fingers lightly.

"I'm afraid the exploring job won't be finished tonight. Or tomorrow night. Bring your appointment

book tomorrow. I want to fill in a few blanks in your schedule."

Bashir said the words lightly, but there was something very...definite in the way he ended the sentence. As if he would brook no argument. As if he knew what he wanted.

"You fill in a few spaces - I'll fill in a few spaces," Garak joked, moving his hand down between Bashir's legs to show exactly what spaces he had in mind to fill, and he made Bashir laugh aloud again.

"Oh, Elim!" Bashir began, his tone still light, but then he sighed as Garak brushed his lips across Bashir's cheek. "Oh, Elim," he breathed, in quite a different tone, and wrapping his arms around Garak, he threw himself into the task of leaving the Cardassian more thoroughly kissed than he had ever been in his life. And when he had him panting in his arms, looking up at him with wide gray eyes full of anticipation and blazing emotion, he said, clearly, "My Elim," - and then began the long and enjoyable process of teaching him that it was true.

FOR WANT OF A SCREWDRIVER

by Leah Starsky

Once again the blue light engulfed the time-traveling Sam Beckett, hurling him through the universe and depositing him, unceremoniously, in another time and another life.

Sam blinked a couple of times, shaking off the disorientation that always accompanied a new leap-in. He was standing beside a sports car, leaning over into the open hood. Someone, somewhere, was talking to him.

"Would ya hand me a wrench?" a muffled voice asked from underneath the car. As Sam turned his attention to the legs protruding from below the chassis, a hand came out, waving in the air.

"Uh...wrench, okay." Sam quickly scanned the garage he was in, heaving a relieved sigh when he saw a tool chest in plain sight on a work bench. He grabbed the requested item and put it into the waiting hand.

"Thanks."

Sam nodded, although the faceless stranger couldn't see him. He stood there uncertainly, wondering what he was supposed to be doing. He gazed at the engine, but nothing jumped out at him. He tried to remember if he knew anything about cars, the leaping-induced amnesia he suffered could be a curse...but other times a blessing, he admitted to himself. Like when you swiss-cheese the painful things. He couldn't quite remember the facts that were temporarily absent, but was glad nonetheless.

While waiting for his usually tardy holographic guide, Sam tried to look for clues about the leap. The Young Rascals were singing *Good Lovin'* on a radio nearby. But it was an oldies station, by the look of the sleek black sports car in front of him. It had to be just about the most modern car he'd come across in his travels, telling him he'd leaped in closer to his own time...not that he knew exactly what his own time was...

Frustrated and starting to feel stupid just standing, Sam bent down to address his companion. "How's it coming?"

A few muffled expletives answering his question, in a language that was definitely not English. It sound to him like...Italian.

"What was that?" he tried again, simultaneously hoping he wasn't also supposed to be speaking Italian and wondering if he **was** and just didn't know it. This leaping could be confusing business.

A leg waved in the air, and he stepped back as the dolly began to slide slowly out from under the car. The black sneakers were attached to a dusty pair of black denims. A slim waist followed, then a gray work shirt on a compact body came into view. Finally, the face was revealed and the man was sitting up, brushing off his clothing.

"Al!" Sam exclaimed, grabbing Al by the arm.

"What?" the mechanic asked, looking up at him.

"Al, uh, I," Sam stuttered to regain his poise. Now, standing right there in front of him, was his partner, Al Calavicci. And he wasn't a hologram. Sam had leaped into himself again!

It was an instantly sobering thought, for it brought memories with it. Memories of being at home in Indiana with his family for Thanksgiving. Trying to save his brother from dying in Vietnam. It had worked out eventually, but it was still a painful memory - and the price had been high.

His eyes began misting up, alarmed, he fought it while turning away to root around in the toolbox.

Al was still waiting. "What?" he repeated.

"I just asked how it was coming," Sam mumbled, keeping his head in the box.

"Y'know what this car needs?" Al asked him with a grin.

Sam shook his head mutely.

"A world -class screwdriver," he winked at his friend and, slapping him on the back, started walking out of the garage. "I'm gonna grab an ice tea," he threw over his shoulder at his confused pal. "Want some?"

He took the question as an invitation and followed Al into the house. Inside, Al headed for what Sam assumed was the kitchen, leaving Sam standing in the living room, staring around him.

A familiar sound to his left made him spin around. "Al!" he exclaimed again, this time at the sight of the hologram from the future.

"Shh," Al cautioned, glancing towards the kitchen.

"Al, is this my...do I live here?" he asked excitedly.

"Yeah, this is the house we shared at the beginning of the project. Even in those days, funds were tight. Everyone had to double up."

Sam didn't comment, too busy taking in the sight of his own home.

"Sam..." Al warmed, seeing the look on his friend's face. "Don't get too comfortable, this isn't permanent."

The words sobered Sam, it never was. Every time he got close, got his life back again, it was only to have it torn away too soon. He decided to keep himself detached this time, not let it affect him. Then, another thought struck him and he turned to Al. "But why am I here?"

Before Al could respond, the other Al came out of the kitchen holding two glasses of tea. He handed one to Sam.

"Thanks," Sam said, feeling very strange at having two of them there at the same time.

"Thank God he can't see me," the hologram murmured. "Ah...let's go in there and talk," he motioned to a door to his right.

"I'll uh, be right back," Sam said and followed. One Al was sitting down on the couch, the other was walking through the wall.

Already inside, Al was grumbling. "Geez, gotta talk in the head in my own house."

Sam said nothing, waiting expectantly.

"Okay. You know the who and where. It's 1989 by the way, we were just getting started with Project Quantum Leap." He punched some buttons on his handlink to Ziggy, super-computer. "This one's gonna be a quickie," he promised. "In the original history, I fixed the car and went out for a test drive. A drunk driver pulled out in front of me at a stop sign. I swerved to avoid hitting him, but the car behind me wasn't so lucky. They weren't paying attention and there was a crash."

"Were you hurt?" Sam blurted in concern, damning his rotten memory.

Al shook his head negative. "It was a real shame. I was okay, came out without a scratch. But one of the passengers in the other car was killed."

"So it's just another leap? I'm here to prevent the accident?" He didn't know why he kept hoping one day the answer would be different.

"Yes, Sam. Ziggy says the easiest way to do that is to keep me home tonight."

"But the drunk driver will still be on the road in that condition."

"Not for long. Ziggy says he gets pulled over by a cop at the next light, and loses his license for six months. By then he's in AA and sobered up."

It was scary sometimes, what the computer knew. But even with his swiss-cheesed memory, Sam knew Ziggy was only playing the percentages. "What odds does he give on this? I don't want to see someone else get hurt instead."

"Don't worry, Sam. Odds are 97% it'll happen exactly the way Ziggy says. This is Saturday night, and the cops got nothing better to do than look for creeps like him."

"Hey - d'you fall in and drown?" a voice called from the other room.

"You better get back out there," Al told him. "Go help me with the car - just keep me from going out. How close am I to fixing it?"

"He...you...said it just needs a world-class screwdriver," Sam said hesitantly, remembering. At Al's grimace, he became curious. "What's that mean?"

"Well, Al began reluctantly, "it's just what Calavicci means in Italian."

Sam looked dubious. "Your name means screwdriver?" Then he grinned. "That's perfect!"

"Shut up and get out there before he gets suspicious," Al groused.

Sam did as told. Only after Al had gone back to the future did he think to ask **how** he was going to keep him home."

"You're not going back to work tonight, are you?" Al asked as Sam joined him on the couch, picking up his abandoned glass.

"No. Why?"

"You've got that 'distracted' air about you again."

Sam smiled. "Nope." He slung his arm around Al's shoulder, just because he could. "I'm all yours."

Al looked dubious - or suspicious - but he let the subject drop.

It felt good touching Al again. Being able to kick his feet up and just ***spend time*** with his best friend. He couldn't maintain any detachment with the warmth of Al's presence filling up his lonely soul. He could only hope it wouldn't hurt too much when it was time to go.

He was about to suggest going out to get a pizza and a six pack when he remembered he was here to keep Al from doing just that.

"Break's over," Al announced abruptly, getting up.

Sam mourned the loss of contact but rose and again followed his companion, while his mind ran through possible ways to keep Al home. Before he realized it, they were back in the garage and Al was once again sliding under the car.

"You gonna help, or just watch?" Al queried pointedly.

"Just watch," Sam said with a grin, although he meant it. His knowledge of cars wasn't intact at the moment. "After all, you're the world-class screwdriver."

"That's world-class screw," he thought he heard Al mumble from under the car.

Sam felt his ears turn red, glad his lewd friend couldn't see and tease him about his prudishness. Al did enough of that as it was. He leaned against the car, more relaxed now that he knew where and what his problem was. "I'm only assisting this operation, doctor. You just tell me what you want and I'll give it to you." To his surprise the suggestiveness of his last words hit him, causing him to blush further.

Luckily, Al was distracted and didn't pick up on it. "Need the wrench again," was all he said.

Sam complied with that, and all his requests for another twenty minutes. The first time his hand brushed Al's while giving him a tool, he fumbled and nearly dropped it. After being holograms to each other for years, he couldn't seem to get used to actually being able to touch Al.

But he knew he'd like to try.

Cool jazz had replaced the oldies, floating out from the sizable entertainment center in the living room and reminding Sam of how eclectic his partner's tastes always were. His own too, if he was honest. The music was a soothingly familiar background as he roamed the room, greedily soaking up the atmosphere and surroundings. Trying to stock up for the inevitable parting ahead. This was **his** home, they were **his** things...his and Al's. He was determined to enjoy it all for every moment God, Time, or Fate gave him.

Al was in the shower, washing away the dirt and grease. So far he hadn't said anything about going out, but Sam knew from what Ziggy had said that he would, soon. He glanced at the clock, wishing the hologram had told him what time the accident took place. Wishing he knew how long he still had...and not wanting to know, either.

"It's not fair," he murmured to himself.

"What's not fair?" He turned to see Al standing there, decked out in more standard dress for him: shiny black pants, a red satin shirt and black jacket, with his blue star pin complimenting the outfit.

Sam wondered how long he'd been standing there watching him. "I was almost getting used to you being dressed normal," he said instead of answering the question, fondly brushing the arm of the black jacket.

"This is normal," Al answered predictably.

"And neither are you," Sam quipped, putting down the paperweight he'd been examining and breezing past Al. "What should we do tonight?" he asked, getting right to the heart of the matter.

"Well," Al answered, "I was going to take a test cruise to see how the car's running. Go up to the Owl, maybe sample the cuisine." Sam knew he was talking about women, not food. "I'd invite you to come along, but..." He didn't finish, didn't have to. Sam always turned him down.

"Do you have to out tonight?' Sam blurted. At Al's quizzical expression, he tried again. "I mean, I thought we'd....hang out here and have a few beers, maybe pop some corn and watch Star Wars again."

On a Saturday night?

"On a Saturday night?" Al said on cue, as if affronted by the mere suggestion.

"I just thought...." Although he'd tried to prepare, up until a moment ago he'd forgotten what day it was. What excuse would keep Al from going out on the town on a weekend?

Al's eyes narrowed now, like they always did when his quick mind smelled something rotten in Denmark. Sam braced himself for what would come next.

"Okay, Sam," Al said softly. "I'll stay here."

Sam was stunned at the easy capitulation, it was his turn to be suspicious. "We'll test drive the car tomorrow, okay?"

"Sounds good," Al answered, taking off his jacket and sitting down on the couch. "You get the beer and popcorn, I'll put the tape in."

Sam was still having trouble believing Al had agreed so easy, but he didn't want to look a gift horse in the mouth. He was being given the opportunity to do one of the things he loved most, with the person he...with his best friend. He hastened to get the food and beverage - breathing a sigh of relief when he found a six-pack in the fridge - then joined his buddy.

Sam found himself sitting very close to Al on the couch, so their bodies touched ever so slightly. He couldn't help it, he craved the physical affection. He'd always been a toucher, his friends and family were used to his impulsive hugs. The one time he'd tried to hug the hologram Al, when he thought he'd never see him again, it was painful to realize he couldn't.

The warmth from the beer and Al's presence drew him in, replacing the long, lonely years with home and heart. Al was right when he'd leaped into himself at seventeen, that wasn't home, not anymore. This was. It was almost a revelation.

The movie was nearly half over when Sam glanced at Al to find him watching him again, obviously knowing something was up. Naturally. Sam was never able to fool Al, not for long. Even the night of his first leap...if Al hadn't been at a fund raiser, he would've known. But what did Al think this time? And what excuse could he give? He didn't dare tell the truth, it might jeopardize the future leap and erase all the good he'd done with people. No matter how he might long to stay home, he couldn't do that.

He felt Al's hand on his arm. "Sam, why don't you turn that off so we can talk?"

He took the remote from the table, switching the tape off and the music back on, reducing the volume. Though he thought furiously, he didn't know what to say.

"I know something's bothering you," Al said in the same, soft tone.

"I..."

"And you know I know."

"I'm just...worried about...the project." He couldn't convincingly lie to Al, either. By this time Sam was almost in a panic. He felt worried.

"Um hum," Al murmured. The hand that was still on his arm began rubbing up and down soothingly. "Are you gonna make me guess?"

"I can't tell you. Can you just leave it at that?"

"Why can't you tell me?"

"You wouldn't...believe me." That wasn't exactly the truth either, he was afraid Al **would**.

"You never know unless you try."

Al was determined to make him squirm. No, that wasn't fair. He was a caring friend, his desire to help his only motivation. Sam found himself almost wishing he'd leap out. He really did hate lying to Al...especially when he was so bad at it.

Al's hand slipped down to take Sam's. "Your hand's like ice."

"It gets cold in the desert at night." It was a strange sensation, Al holding his hand.

Made infinitely stranger when Al rubbed a finger over his knuckle, then turned the hand over, lifted it to his lips, and placed a kiss in the palm. Sam tried hard to keep his hand from trembling and sat very still, barely breathing.

"You were looking at me so strangely today. You really wanted me to stay at home, with you. It got me thinking, wondering why?"

"And you think you know?" Sam asked, amazed he was able to keep his voice from squeaking or shaking. Al Calavicci was by nature somewhat reticent. He endured Sam's more physical ways, but kept his own displays to a minimum. It was obvious that he did think he knew, and what.

"Am I wrong?" Al asked, relying on their silent communication to fill in the awkward blanks. When he met Sam's gaze, Sam found his eyes filled with acceptance - and a touch of frightened uncertainty.

If told he was wrong, he'd be mortified at the mistake, maybe to the point of pulling back from their friendship. Was he wrong? Could it be that this was what Sam had been feeling all day after all?

"What do **you** want?" Sam asked, swallowing on a dry mouth.

"We're talking about you," Al reminded with a wry smile.

"Now," he whispered. "We're talking about **us.**"

"What do **we** want, Sam?" Al's voice dropped lower, seductive.

"I think...maybe...we need to find out."

It was almost odd, being with a lover who knew him so well. Al had known his every mood and feeling, intimately, without overcoming the final barrier. Now he made the first move for his shy friend. He reached up and put a gentle hand behind Sam's head, pulling it down so their lips could meet.

The tentative brushing of mouths was like the coursing energy of leaping and the feeling of finally coming home, all at once. Peace and excitement, prayer and promise.

They parted, gazing into each other's eyes. No words had to be spoken, not anymore. Sam smiled, found himself leaning in for another taste of his love's lips. This time Al's mouth opened and he fell in, searching, giving, taking.

Time became an abstract concept that Sam lost track of, he only knew that at some point he was being led into Al's bedroom. It was like a dream. A wonderful dream he didn't want to wake from. His shirt was undone, his chest heaving and the blood slowly boiling in his veins. Al's state was a mirror of his own, eyes dark and exotic, an endless well of emotion Sam knew he could slip into and never emerge.

They undressed each other, not slowly nor desperately, more a simple act of necessity performed for swift disregard. Two pairs of hands roamed mutually, trailing heat in their wake. No questions, only the silent dance, so perfect Sam felt it must have been choreographed by destiny.

The bed was soft and cool, their bodies hard and hot. Pressed together, they fit like a puzzle. They began to rock together, riding the pleasure that was spiraling

upwards. They traveled the road of discovery like actors performing a familiar script.

Sam cried out as Al's hand reached between their moving bodies, grasping his erection, stroking to learn its contours. He arched into the touch, speeding up the pace. Coaxing Al to bring their straining cocks into contact.

Pleasure flared like a bright-hot light, eclipsing reality, taking it and shaking it until nothing would ever be the same again. He heard Al cry out with him, as they reached that sought-after place together. Their semen merged, the last place of bonding sealing them together forever.

Sam padded silently to the kitchen, still naked, searching for a late-night drink. He was happier, more content that he'd been since the start of the quantum leaping. At peace.

He'd found some orange juice and was gulping thirstily from the carton when he heard the distinctive sound of the imaging chamber door. Startled, he just managed to catch the carton before it collided with the floor, and to hastily dash into a chair behind the table to hide his nakedness. He felt himself, predictably, turning red.

"Hey, buddy, how's it going?" Al said as he stepped through his doorway. His face was clear of knowledge, apparently he wasn't yet aware of the new developments.

But Sam didn't have time to ponder how long it would take Al's memories to catch up, for the minute he got a good look at Sam's face his eyes narrowed. Instead of questioning though, he turned to the handlink and began punching buttons. In response, the link started squealing, a tell-tale noise.

Al looked askance at Sam. "What'd you do this time?" he accused. "All you had to do was keep me at home, and as usual..." he took a moment to actually read the information displayed, and abruptly fell silent. After a moment, he looked up at Sam again.

Sam nodded. "You inadvertently slept with me?! What the hell does that mean?"

Sam shrugged, holding his ground. His head came up proudly.

Al didn't hesitate to meet his eyes. "I remember," he said now, quietly.

"And how do you feel about that?" Sam asked boldly.

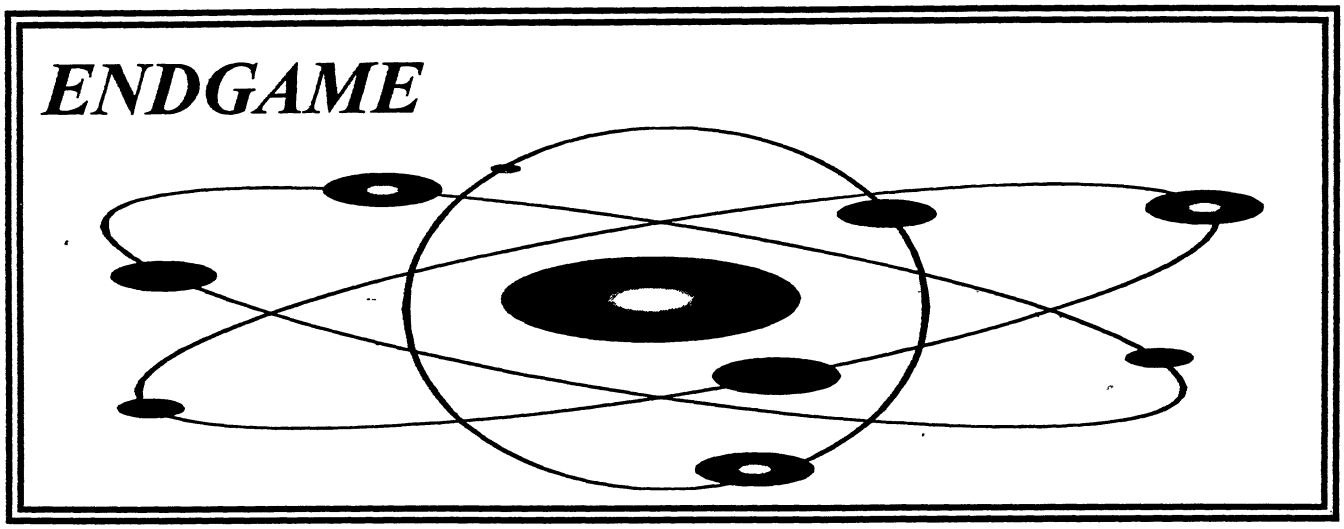
Al's smile this time was different. It held knowledge...and love. More love than Sam had ever seen in those eyes before...at least before a few hours ago. "When you come home," he promised huskily. "When you come home I'll show you how I feel about it. All night long."

Sam grinned with relief and freedom. "What about the leap?" he asked, shamefully aware he'd only just now thought of it again.

"Huh?" Al said, equally distracted. "Oh, yeah. Everything worked out perfectly."

"Perfectly," Sam agreed, feeling the tug of time. He didn't get to ask any further questions, but it didn't really matter. When the leap effect took him back into time, he went knowing his soul would never again be empty and cold. Al's warm presence was living inside.

ENDGAME



by Taliesin

An ambitious endeavor.

Captain Marko Ramius snorted softly to himself. He was lying on his bunk with his hands tucked behind his head staring absently at the bulkhead close above him. After so many years, he hardly noticed the cramped quarters, nor could he recall a time when he had ever been bothered by it. Claustrophobic men made poor submariners. So did the unimaginative.

It certainly took an imaginative man to reasonably expect to successfully defect from the Russian navy, taking his officers and several thousand tons of Soviet technology with him: the Red October herself, cutting-edge flagship of the Motherland's submarine fleet, and just out of the shipyards. An ambitious endeavor, indeed. One soon to come to fruition.

Twenty hours to the Grand Banks. Twenty hours to their rendezvous with the American fleet. It was almost over, and by the same measure there was still so much which could go wrong. However, they'd made contact with an American submarine, which had *not* tried to blow them out of the water, which was more than could be said of their Russian counterparts. The meeting was set. Someone on the other side obviously had a plan. That was well; Ramius had plans of his own.

A light knock at the door interrupted his musings. Borodin hesitantly stuck his head around the edge of the opening door, then advanced the rest of the way into the room at Ramius' welcoming gesture. Ramius cocked an eyebrow on seeing Borodin lock the door behind him, but his expression was neutral by the time the other man turned to face him.

Vassily Borodin was a good man and a good friend. Second in command of Red October, it was he Ramius had first approached with this crazy scheme. There had been only the most minimal of dangers in doing so. Each of his officers had his own reason for wanting to defect; Ramius made it his policy to turn a blind eye to those reasons. It was enough for him that they would follow his lead. He had trained them all and knew their strengths and weaknesses as he knew his own. He had known who to trust with his plans and who not to; he did not need to know why. But with Borodin, the trust was absolute. He had not needed to question the man or his motives, for he knew quite well what they were. Ramius had suspected for years that Vassily was in love with him.

To say homosexuality was frowned on in the Soviet Union was to grossly understate the case.

The penalties ranged from imprisonment to execution. Under the circumstances, Borodin could be relied upon to be receptive to the idea of departing his homeland. But more than that, he would never do anything which might bring harm to Ramius. This was understood. Ramius had known almost since their first meeting, though he doubted Borodin knew that he knew.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your sleep period, Captain." Borodin offered with a touch of diffidence. Ramius realized he'd been staring at the other man. He looked away, waving him to a seat, but making no move to rise himself. It was ungainly for two people to move about simultaneously in the cramped quarters.

"No need to apologize. I take it you came to tell me the work is finished?" Circumspect out of habit, Ramius need have no fear of being overheard. His cabin, like the officers' mess, was soundproofed. Though privacy was a rare commodity in communist Russia, secrecy was highly valued by those in power. What was discussed by the officers of a Soviet submarine was not for the ears of the crew. He very much doubted the designers had even considered the possibility that such discussions might include the planning of defection.

"Yes, Captain. Melekhin and I have just finished rigging the radiation alarms. Our "reactor malfunction" ought to go off without a hitch." Borodin slumped onto the bench opposite Ramius' bunk. Uniform mildly rumpled, hair loosed from its usual rigor to fall in soft commas across his forehead, he looked as if he'd spent the last several hours crawling around the engine compartment. Which was hardly surprising as that was, in fact, precisely what he'd been doing. "Some of the crew saw us at it, of course. They're convinced we were looking for further evidence of sabotage."

"Good. It will help make the "accident" seem more real." Ramius propped himself up on one elbow. As was his habit, he had climbed into his bunk almost fully dressed. Only his coat and shoes had been removed in deference to comfort. One had to be prepared for anything while at sea, and the captain of a Soviet submarine did not appear at the con in anything less than full dress uniform, even in the gravest of emergencies. "You look tired. Why don't you pour us a drink?"

"Tea, sir?" Borodin gestured to the samovar at his elbow.

"No, I think not." Ramius' expression was grave, his eyes bent on the floor where Putin's body had fallen. It seemed he could still see the man gasping out his last, even as his murderer poured tea on the deck to make it look like an accident. Borodin's gaze followed his, understanding instantly.

"You had no choice, Captain. We could not have proceeded with the Political Officer on board. His authority to countermand your orders would have made this endeavor impossible."

"I know that, Vassily. Nonetheless, the prospect of drinking tea here is ... unpleasant. In any case, something of a celebration is in order, I think. There's a bottle of vodka in the storage compartment above the bunk."

Borodin didn't ask why Ramius couldn't get it himself. Disentangling oneself from the confining bunks could be time consuming. He merely rose and stepped around the table to kneel on the bench-seat which abutted the bunk. When he stretched up to open the center compartment, his body blocked the cabin lights, throwing the bunk's occupant into shadow and his mind into disarray.

"Ah," Borodin re-emerged with the bottle he sought, unaware of the sudden effect his nearness had on Ramius. He set the bottle on the table and settled more comfortably on the seat, half-turned away so that he was not quite looking at Ramius, nor quite looking away. Borodin was too polite to turn his back on a friend, even in so unexpectedly relaxed a moment. He opened the bottle and poured generous measures of the alcohol into two cups. They were both on their sleep shift for six more hours; it would likely do no harm to relax a little. His fingers brushed Ramius' when he handed over a glass.

"What shall we drink to, *tovarich*?" Ramius asked quietly to cover his confusion. He kept his gaze on his cup, staring down into the colorless liquid

pooled in the bottom of the glass and set round by the ornate steel cage of the base. Borodin was silent a long moment.

"Freedom, Captain?" He didn't quite look at Ramius, and he might have meant anything.

"Yes, let's drink to freedom." Ramius leaned forward to touch the rim of his glass lightly to Borodin's. They both drank.

Freedom. Ramius considered the idea. Within the next twenty hours, they would be free men. Freedom among the Americans, or in death. Either way, the constraints of life in the Soviet state would no longer hold sway. There was very little to lose, in what might quite literally be the last chance.

A year had passed since his wife's death. A year of guilt and abstinence. A year of mourning and planning. She'd died while he was at sea; running deep and silent, no radio contact until he'd returned more than a week later. She already lay silent in her grave by the time he knew she had gone. His grief was real, for he had loved her, but his guilt was the monster which drove him. He had not been there for her during her life, nor at her death, nor after. When the plans for the Red October came before him he saw not only its undeniable intent as a destructive force, but its use to him as a means of escape, from the country, and from his guilt. A year was a long time.

Ramius leaned over Borodin's shoulder to return his empty glass to the table. As he drew back, he brushed close enough to feel a tremor pass through the commander's strong form. He let his hand rest unmoving on that broad shoulder. After a moment, he shifted more upright and brought his free hand up to settle on the other shoulder.

"The engineering access tubes tend to be cramped," he commented softly, beginning a firm massage of tensed muscles. Borodin trembled under his hands, but did not move away. On the contrary, he shifted to sit with his back fully to Ramius, silently offering better access. For a time, Ramius simply worked at the knots in Borodin's shoulders, not a word spoken between them. He heard Borodin's breath quicken, and marveled that so innocent an action on his part could have such an obvious effect. Slowly his hands began to drift.

Ramius' fingers wormed their way between the buttons on Borodin's coat, sliding past the placket of the uniform jacket to stroke across the fine lawn of his shirt. Borodin gasped and wiggled, his head dipping slowly down in response to the other hand, which soothed the short hair at the nape of his neck. His lips were parted, eyes half-open and focused disbelievingly on the movement of Ramius' fingers under his coat. With some mild contortion, Ramius found a nipple and stroked it carefully.

"Captain, no. We shouldn't." Certainty was conspicuously missing from Borodin's thready whisper.

"No, perhaps we shouldn't. But then, neither should we be stealing across to America in a submarine belonging to the Soviet navy." Ramius bent his lips to Borodin's neck. His chuckle was muffled against the warm skin. "Under the circumstances, don't you think you could find something to call me other than 'captain'?"

"Marko..."

Ramius smiled. It had been a long time since he'd heard his name spoken in that particular tone of agonized pleasure. He wondered absently if, in fact, he had ever heard his name spoken quite like that before. Borodin made to turn, but Ramius held him fast. His right hand remained trapped inside Borodin's jacket, caressing in confined circles. The other left off teasing his hairline and started down over the chest to join the right, undoing buttons as it went. Soon he had the jacket completely open, offering unrestrained movement.

Ramius blew softly in a conveniently placed ear, then whispered huskily, "Lean forward now." In a trance of surprise and pleasure, Borodin did as he was asked, shrugging automatically out of the coat as it was pushed off his shoulders. Ramius' strong hand guided him back into his half embrace and he leaned obediently against the bunk.

Ramius smoothed his palms over Borodin's torso, enjoying the resilience of hard muscles and the

heat of the man which bled through the linen dress shirt. He allowed his fingers to slowly drift from button to button, absently unfastening them as he went. It was odd, to touch a man's broad flat chest, to so easily feel the pounding of his heart, muffled only by layers of muscle. And while Ramius willingly admitted he had no idea what he was doing, it seemed nothing had ever felt so right. His hand slid into the open shirt and Borodin arched back against his shoulder with a gasp.

"So sensitive," Ramius murmured approvingly. He nibbled gently on Borodin's earlobe while his hands explored the bared chest through the gaping shirt. Almost accidentally, his fingers brushed over one small brown nipple. The man in his arms moaned softly, so he repeated the gesture. Receiving the same response, he lavished his attention, and his caresses, on both erect nipples for several minutes. His mouth shifted to lick and suck on the pulsepoint beating so frantically just under the strong jaw. Murmuring unintelligibly, Borodin turned his head, blindly seeking.

Ramius drew back, regarding the face turned up to his. Eyes shuttered, cheeks flushed with arousal, somehow simultaneously erotically charged and heartrendingly innocent, it drew from him a tenderness he didn't know he still owned. Ramius hesitated only a moment before leaning in to press his lips against their tempting counterparts. Borodin's whimper was lost in the meeting of their mouths. So alike, this, and so different from kissing a woman. He could feel the slight rasp of incipient stubble, and wondered how his own mustache and beard felt to Borodin. Daring, his tongue darted out to take advantage of the slightly parted lips. The taste of the man was appealing — a little tea, a touch of vodka, and something else which spoke simply of maleness and of Borodin himself. As if he somehow tasted the *meaning* of the man. By the time he drew back, he was panting, and only partially from lack of breath.

He nuzzled at the base of Borodin's neck, gently coaxing him around to face forward again as he did so. Then Ramius rested his chin on Borodin's shoulder, and watched his own hands run lightly down the man's chest to take hold of the fastening of his trousers. The work of a moment to open it from this familiar angle, to tug down the zipper and peel the flaps aside. He slid both hands under the elastic of soft white shorts, feeling first the crisp brush of body hair and finally the softest of skin encasing the hardest of flesh. Borodin groaned, pressing his head back hard into Ramius's shoulder as he was taken into the tender grip of strong hands.

Ramius carefully closed his fingers around the rigid organ, fighting the uncertainty. The first cock other than his own he had ever touched, but not so different, he realized. A tentative stroke down its length produced a choked moan from Borodin. Encouraged, Ramius closed his fist around the erection and began a steady stroking. If the cabin had not been soundproofed, the sounds which escaped Borodin then would have made him distinctly nervous. The movement of his hand uninterrupted, Ramius took a slow visual survey of the body trapped between his arms and the bunk. Borodin's white shirt hung loosely from his shoulders, his tanned chest exposed. His trousers gaped open, Ramius' hands moving under the concealment of his underwear. His back arched, head tossing side to side, hips beginning to sway under the encouragement of Ramius' fingers. But what struck Ramius hardest was Borodin's own hands, lying to his sides, palms up. The defenseless submission of the posture disturbed him.

With a last, longing caress, Ramius removed his hands and lay back on the bunk. Borodin remained unmoving for several minutes, the only sound his harsh panting. Finally, he turned to shyly meet his captain's gaze. Ramius smiled and began to slowly unbutton his shirt, his eyes never leaving Borodin's. Warm fingers covered his before he had two buttons undone. Borodin twisted to kneel up on the bench and brought Ramius' hands to his lips. He kissed the back of each finger and brushed his lips over each palm, then gently pressed Ramius' arms to the bunk at his sides. Borodin took over the task of undressing Ramius.

Each button slipped out of the fabric's embrace with ease and Ramius felt remarkably light-headed as the material divided before the gentle assault. Borodin spread open the shirt and lay his palms on Ramius's lightly furred chest. Hands pressed

firmly as they ran up over his ribcage to his shoulders and back down, pausing only momentarily to tease aching nipples. Ramius moaned his pleasure, enjoying the spark of arousal that danced in Borodin's eyes at the sound.

His pants were next; the fastenings opened with flattering haste. He obligingly lifted his hips to allow Borodin to pull the material down his thighs. It was not safe on this ship to undress fully, much as he was certain both of them would have liked. Breath and reason fled suddenly under the onslaught of Borodin's mouth. Ramius was sucked deep into a hot cavern, surrounded by liquid pleasure. He threw his head back, a moan escaping his throat. One hand crept down to feather through Borodin's short dark hair, not guiding his movements, merely following them. Ramius drowned pleasantly in the gentle suction, almost unaware of the fingers which pinched and rolled his nipples in counterpoint. His hips moved to Borodin's command, thrusting deeper into the welcoming throat.

Ramius tugged hard on the hair tangled in his fingers, resolutely pulling Borodin's head away before he'd taken his fill of the sweet luxury of his mouth. The other man looked up questioningly, the edge of sudden anxiety dulled by Ramius' gentle smile.

"Take off your shoes, Vassily, and come here."

"There is no room," Borodin objected softly, though he obeyed with alacrity.

"There is enough." Ramius held open his arms. The narrow bunk was only barely wide enough for one to sleep on. Ramius had no interest in sleeping at the moment.

Borodin slid sweetly into his arms, his weight settling comfortably onto Ramius' slightly larger body. The rough brush of his trousers against Ramius' exposed cock forced a groan from his throat. Borodin carefully propped himself up on his elbows, looking down at the man in his arms with a worried expression. Ramius chuckled and lifted a hand to pull Borodin down into a highly satisfying kiss. Strong hands wormed under his shoulders to cradle his head, holding him steady to receive Borodin's enthusiastic attentions. He opened his mouth to the eager tongue, following its lead, returning to thrust into the other man's mouth. They shared breath, intimately acquainted with the rise and fall of each ribcage.

Borodin broke off with a sigh. He raised up again to look down at Ramius, his fingers stroking absently through the silvered hair, thumbs brushing over the beard which fleeced a strong jawline. "I never hoped... I never believed..." he shook his head, unable to finish the thought. "I love you, Marko."

"I know," Ramius found his voice unexpectedly husky. He raised a gentle finger to trace the arched brows that had fascinated him for so long, the curve of which occasionally made Borodin look slightly demonic in the indirect lighting of the con. "I've known a long time."

"But you never..."

"It was not the time, or place." He drew the startled man down into another kiss, more passionate than those preceding it. Now was the time for action, not talk. Ramius swept his hands up Borodin's hard-muscled back, sliding them under the shirt to touch the warm body. Their bare chests met, nipples brushing against each other with electric abandon. Borodin's hips undulated, pressing his trapped cock hard against its exposed twin, the intimate massage driving Ramius wild with desire.

Ramius slid his hands under the waistband of Borodin's trousers and pushed them down to his knees. Sliding smoothly up the back of powerful thighs, his hands closed on the firm globes of Borodin's ass and pulled him close. The kiss broke off as both men hissed when their bare cocks brushed for the first time. Erect, sensitive flesh rubbed again, and again. Borodin's head came down, his mouth taking Ramius' to smother the sounds they were both making. One hand remained cradling Ramius' neck; the other slid under their writhing bodies to palm the base of his spine, pressing him up into each downward thrust. Ramius' hands, filled with the bounty of Borodin's buttocks, guided him into each powerful stroke.

It took only a few minutes. The intoxicating thrust of erections, tongues and bodies fed off itself, sending them higher and higher until there was nowhere left to go. Borodin froze suddenly, his loud cry muffled in Ramius' mouth as the pleasure poured out of him. The feel of the hot rush spilling onto his pounding cock and belly send Ramius over the edge as well. His hips bucked wildly as his hands pressed Borodin's spasming ass even harder against him. The white explosion of pleasure filled his senses and he knew no more.

Ramius was cold and alone when he awoke. "Vassily..."

"Here, Marko," Borodin replied before Ramius could finish the mournful sigh. He knelt on the bench and applied a warm wet cloth to Ramius' tender groin, cleaning him up with gentle efficiency. When he was done, he helped Ramius pull up and refasten his trousers, though he left the shirt open, as was his own. He moved away again to drop the damp cloth in the tiny sink.

"Come here." Ramius held out his arms, and Borodin entered them willingly. A few minor adjustments and they were both comfortable. Ramius liked the heavy weight pinning him to the bunk. Perhaps it should have felt suffocating, but he wondered if being surrounded by such warmth and love was not unlike the womb. At any rate it was deliciously pleasant. He lifted a lazy hand to stroke the head which rested so trustingly on his shoulder. "We should do this again."

"What, now?"

Ramius chuckled softly at the mildly offended tone. "No, somewhere with more room." He paused, thinking of their earlier discussion of what they each desired upon reaching America. Borodin had smiled as he claimed to need two wives, knowing he would have none, and Ramius, startled by his reaction to that bittersweet curve of lips, had obliquely chased Vassily away with talk of his dead wife. He was ashamed he'd used her as a shield against this man's love. "Montana, perhaps."

Borodin's head came up so suddenly he nearly knocked it against the bulkhead. His startled eyes searched Ramius' frantically. "You mean that? You would come with me?"

"I somehow doubt I have any choice." Ramius pressed his palm to Borodin's breast, curving around the left side of the broad ribcage, feeling under it the steady beat of his heart. "You have my heart," he explained simply, ignoring Borodin's sudden gasp. "As I cannot live without it, I shall have to follow you."

"Ah, it is an even trade then," Borodin replied when he could catch his breath, "for you have mine as well." He let his head rest back on Ramius' shoulder with a sigh, and lay listening to the heartbeat he had just claimed for his own. Ramius returned to stroking his hair. With a few sleepy shifts making their embrace, if possible, even closer, they slowly surrendered themselves to sleep.

Habit kicked in to wake Ramius near the end of his sleep shift. He swam slowly up out of the mists of slumber, aware of the warm weight pressing him to the bunk almost before he remembered his own name. Waking with Borodin wrapped around him seemed perfectly natural, not to mention highly desirable, but there was no time for that now. He had to return to the con, even if Borodin had a few more hours to sleep.

Ramius wiggled very carefully out from under his lover's lax sleepy weight. It was impossible to avoid waking him; not when they were so closely entwined. But when Borodin's eyes blinked slowly open, Ramius merely kissed them closed again with a whispered command to go back to sleep. Either Borodin was more tired than Ramius had anticipated, or simply used to obeying him in all things, for he sighed softly and drifted off again.

Running a little water in the small basin, Ramius cleaned up perfunctorily. He buttoned his shirt, pulled on his shoes and shrugged into his coat. When he once again looked the perfect model of the Russian Submarine Captain, he turned back to

the occupied bunk. The interlude was over. From the moment he left his cabin, to the moment they either successfully handed over Red October to the Americans or went to the bottom with her, there would be no rest. The emotions exchanged here had to be set aside until it was once again safe to admit them. Ramius allowed himself a final moment of sentiment. A quick tug freed the blanket, which he pulled up over the sleeping form. He tucked it snugly around Borodin's shoulders and leaned over to gently kiss his soft lips.

"Sleep well, *schertze moy*." My heart.

Borodin shifted, murmuring sleepily. Ramius smiled to hear his name on the lips of the sleeping man, brushed his cheek against the soft hair, and let himself out of the cabin, locking it behind him.

The bottle of vodka was half-gone, Ramius was half-soused, and neither situation was ideal in the least. Not by a long shot. He needed more vodka, but there wasn't any except that locked in Dr. Petrov's cabin, reserved for purely medicinal purposes. While Petrov was no longer around to deny him access, he very much doubted he could find his way there and back again in his current condition. The door to his cabin opened suddenly, startling him.

"Sorry. I knocked twice." The American, Jack Ryan, peered uncertainly around the door. Though Ramius made no welcoming move, he apparently decided to risk it. The door closed softly behind him.

"Didn't hear you." Ramius' English was more heavily accented than usual, the effect of the vodka. He was neither welcoming nor discouraging; for himself, he couldn't quite decide if he wanted the young man to stay or go away. Ryan seated himself on the far bench. Ramius noticed it was precisely where Borodin had sat during their first wistful discussion of America. A more rational part of him pointed out that there were very few places to sit in the cramped quarters, and only one facing him.

"May I?" Ryan gestured to the bottle of vodka.

"Help yourself." Ramius lay back on the bunk, not quite comfortable with the thoughtful gleam in the other man's eyes. The young American was entirely too perceptive. From afar, he'd reasoned out Ramius' intentions too close for comfort, what he could do in person didn't bear thinking on. Ramius didn't like to let Ryan read his eyes.

"Does your shoulder hurt?"

"Not anymore." That, at least, was true. Amazing what enough alcohol could do, even for a bullet through the shoulder. Funny, that it seemed to have no power to lessen the other pain which ripped at his guts.

Ramius' curt answers seemed to have silenced the American, at least temporarily. He returned to the morass of his own thoughts.

My fault. Should have double-checked the roster. Shouldn't have relied on Dr. Petrov to make certain all the crew was off. My fault my fault my fault my fault...

His mind, sadistic bugger that it was, replayed the whole thing again. The sudden shove and sound of gunfire, the rush of adrenaline which his body almost mistook for excitement. Then the look on Borodin's face as he subsided suddenly to the floor. Ramius grabbing him, taking hold of the jacket and tearing it open. The oddly joyful tinkle of brass buttons on the deck and the crimson stain which spread too rapidly over the purity of white. He had known immediately there was nothing to be done. His hand pressed firmly over Borodin's heart, exactly as it had only hours earlier, this time feeling not the strong living beat, but the faltering pulse of the dying. And Borodin, eyes locked on his to the last, whispering how he would like to have seen Montana, his clear gaze saying what the words before an audience could not. He had caught Borodin's head as it fell back, lowered him tenderly to the deck, as if he could still be injured by the fall.

If the silo-hatch warning had not gone off then, he would never have budged from Borodin's side, come what may. But they were all looking to him

for what to do, and suddenly all he could think of was finding and killing the spy who had murdered his lover. He had gone off after the man not to save his ship, but for revenge. And some part of him must have wanted to die, for he had carelessly walked into an obvious ambush. All it had earned him was a bullet in the shoulder, poor second to the death he craved, and the necessity of waiting for another to carry out the revenge that was his alone. He had heard the shots, tasted them and the bitter knowledge that it was done. It had not helped.

"You were close." Ryan's pronouncement was soft, but sure for all that.

Ramius' head jerked up to meet the American's knowing gaze. There was no point in lying, or pretending to misunderstand, his reaction had already told Ryan all the truth he needed to know. "Yes."

"I'm sorry." And he poured another measure of vodka into Ramius' cup. The ex-Captain of the Red October drained it in one swift gulp and held it out for more. Silently, Ryan poured the vodka.

Ramius tried to get a handle on his feelings. Why so hard? It had been so short a time he had held Borodin's precious gift. It did not seem right that the death of this man should hurt so much more than that of his wife of thirty years. Perhaps it was the sting of something lost, the potential of which had never been fully realized.

He knew his wound was not bad. Men survived such injuries every day. Men died from less every day. The will to live was all. He wondered if he had it in him. Victory against the Russian fleet had turned to ashes in his mouth, the promised glories of America tawdry baubles not worth the effort. This one man's death, so close to safety, had made of all his noble pretensions mere base lies. Ramius gulped his vodka and lusted after the surcease of pain in the silence of the grave.

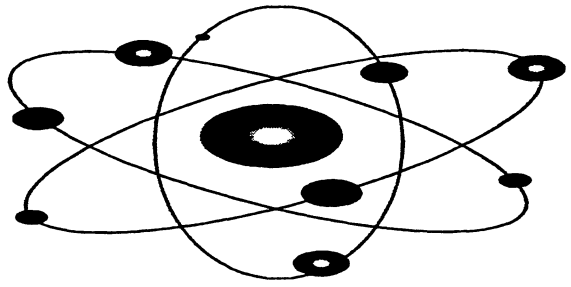
Unbidden, his eyes rose to regard Ryan. Dark-haired, like his Vassily, but with light eyes, so penetrating, conniving. Not like Vassily. Vassily was trust itself, loyalty to a fault. Not a blind loyalty, but an unswerving one. He had made it all possible, this mad venture into escape. If he was afraid, he never showed it; if he doubted, he kept it to himself; if he disagreed, he was bound never to say so except in the mildest of manners. Those broad shoulders had supported Ramius' bid for freedom. That broad body had covered and protected his in the extremity of pleasure and the sudden onset of violence.

Ramius closed his eyes and conjured the memory of Borodin's body. Laying on this bunk, the hard weight pressing down upon him. Unsought came the memory of being shoved aside in the con as Borodin came between him and the gunman. As Borodin sacrificed his own life for his lover's. Tears sheened his eyes when he reopened them to meet Ryan's squarely.

"What will you do in America?" Ryan asked, correctly guessing that the most dangerous moment had passed. Ramius wondered cynically if Ryan was truly concerned about him, or only for the information he could give the United States, and what he had been prepared to do to see Ramius got there safely. It no longer mattered.

Borodin had taken Ramius' heart with him into the silence of the grave. He had also given his own into Ramius' safekeeping. He could no more stop that heart from beating than he could have knowingly destroyed Borodin himself. Borodin's sacrifice was too precious to be thrown away.

"I think... I shall live in Montana."



A REASON TO STAY

by Calico

"It isn't easy to stay when your friends tell you to go
When your heart tells you 'yes' but your head tells you no
And though we searched for a compromise
Looked in each other's eyes for answers
The die had been cast we were all out
Of last second chances...
I was building a bridge between us
You were building a wall
And the whole thing crumbled and tumbled
In the eye of the storm...."

--- Jimmy Scott.

La Fiamma stared at the place where the gun hit the water, the kicked-up spray caught in freeze frame in his mind's eye. "I don't believe this," he muttered, emotions rising with the cascading droplets.

"Lundy!" he yelled and started forward.

Lundy turned at the shout and saw his partner emerge from concealment. He tensed as he recognized the anger in the step.

"What the hell are you doing?" La Fiamma demanded, as soon as he had the Texan's attention.

"What do you think you're doing following me?" Lundy demanded in return, his eyes narrowing. *Don't rub me the wrong way now, La Fiamma,* he silently warned. *I'm in no mood for it.*

The warning caught La Fiamma's attention and he pulled up a few feet from his partner. "I get Carlisle to bypass the paperwork and release your Colt to me, only to watch you take it and go tearing off with hardly a word-- what the hell do you think I'd do?"

"If it's thanks you want--"

"No. An explanation...of that stunt you just pulled." His arm gestured toward the lake.

"It's my business," Lundy snapped and started to turn away. "Not yours."

"No?" He grabbed at Lundy's arm. Lundy shrugged him off violently, but didn't complete the turn. Letting his arm drop, La Fiamma ignored the look that told him to retreat. "Having that gun jammed against my head isn't my business?"

"Well, it isn't there now, so forget about it."

"That Colt was so damned important you got suspended over it. I almost got killed. A young kid did get killed and now you--"

"Well, now it can't hurt anyone, can it?" Lundy retorted and turned away.

This isn't helping either of us, La Fiamma told himself as he watched Lundy stride toward his truck. *I've got to calm down. It's all happened too fast. No kid. No case. No suspension. But it hasn't solved anything, has it?*

"Levon, wait," he called out and started to jog over.

Hearing the change in tone, Lundy pulled up and stopped. He compressed his lips and stretched his head backwards, trying to relieve the kinks. Turning, he rested his arm on the hood of the Jimmy and waited for his partner to catch up.

"Look, I'm sorry," La Fiamma apologized. He caught his partner's eye and held the gaze. "Ever since you were locked...

"Talk to me. Let me help."

Lundy studied the ground, silently debating with himself. La Fiamma continued to watch him, saying nothing, willing himself to patience.

Suddenly, Lundy kicked viciously at a stone and faced La Fiamma. "Let's just drop it, okay?"

"But--"

"Look, it has nothing to do with you."

La Fiamma jerked as if he'd been punched. "Yeah, it seems like nothing in this town has to do with me," he muttered bitterly. "I don't belong here. I don't know why I even bother," he added as he turned to leave.

"La Fiamma, hold up." Lundy reached out and grabbed his partner's arm, forcing him to stop, then met the look in the blue eyes.

"Look, Levon," La Fiamma said gently, his tone softened by the long silence. "Maybe it isn't my business why you tossed the gun, but it doesn't take a genius to see something's bugging you."

"I know you're my partner, but..."

La Fiamma waited, until he was certain Lundy would not continue.

"But what? What more do I have to do to get you to talk to me? Is there some kind of initiation rite I have to pass first?"

Lundy hesitated, a part of him longing to share what was troubling him. He looked into the blue eyes, noted the unspoken concern, and started to...

...blue eyes wavered, blurred, and coalesced into other eyes...

...and familiar pain of vulnerability breached and trust broken...

No! Not again. Not with this one. "Damn you, La Fiamma," Lundy grated, shying away from impending danger. "Whassamatter--my actions too cowboy for you?" he launched in attack. "In Chicago, they wouldn't do things like this, right? I only have to work with you, you know, not live with you. And if you don't like it, you know what you can do about it."

La Fiamma stared hard at the Texan. "Ask the lieutenant for a new partner? Is that what you're telling me, Lundy?"

Lundy stared back. It hadn't been what he meant, was it? He was so tired, he just wanted to be left alone. "Always was your option, **partner.**"

Stung by the words, La Fiamma missed the tone underneath them. Flushing, he lost his temper. "I'll do you one better, Lundy," he flared, jabbing a finger at Lundy's chest. Lundy's hand came up instinctively to ward off the blow. La Fiamma automatically dropped his arm, but leaned closer, until they were almost touching. "I'll ask her for a new **town.**"

La Fiamma started to say more, then stopped. His hands clenched into fists, then flexed open as he turned. He stalked back to his car, never looking over his shoulder.

Lundy sagged against the Jimmy, emotionally drained. He was too tired to do anything but watch La Fiamma leave. *Don't do this to me. You're too damn close already.*

Joanne Beaumont stared at the piece of paper, mindful of the angry young detective who had stormed into her office and thrust it at her, letting him fidget in front of her while she collected her thoughts. *A transfer request? Now what's the problem between these two?*

She looked up to meet the blue eyes. "You mind telling me what's behind this?"

La Fiamma shrugged, easing the tension in his shoulders. "It just isn't working out. I don't belong down here. It's too different. And I figure it's better to recognize that now...before I put down too many roots."

"You mean before you establish too many ties to us, don't you?"

La Fiamma winced, finding this conversation more difficult than he expected. "Well, this was only supposed to be temporary. Most things here aren't mine anyway. Left them where my home is."

"Bull, La Fiamma. You're ours now. Whether you want to admit it or not. Do you think this was set up so you can waltz in and out any time you feel like it? When Chicago sent you here--"

"There are other places besides Chicago, Lieutenant," La Fiamma interrupted. "I know I can't go back there. But there are other places that could take me. Somewhere...anywhere...**up north.**"

"Really? Just like that, you think?"

"I'm a good cop, Lieutenant. You can't deny that."

"And what about Lundy?" Beaumont asked, ignoring the comment. When La Fiamma didn't say anything, she pressed, fairly certain she could guess what had happened. "You know, Lundy? Your partner? The real reason for all this."

"I'm sure he'll be happy to get a real Texan for a partner," La Fiamma drawled sarcastically.

"Really now? Are you so sure of that? Is that from reading his mind? Or have you talked to him about it?"

"Talk to him? That's a joke," La Fiamma said, with a bitter laugh. "An exercise in futility."

"Then you talk to me, Joey. Now. Tell me what happened and let me help."

La Fiamma started at the trap he'd fallen in. He began to pace in the small room. "Can't do, Joanne. You know that. It's between him and me."

"Not anymore it isn't." She paused and studied him. No one had more expressive eyes than the young man in front of her. They often told her more than the assertive stance and today was no exception. "Look I've been there. I've told you that before. And I know Levon."

La Fiamma shook his head. "It's not that I don't appreciate what you're trying to do, Joanne, but I can't. Sorry."

Resisting an urge to beat his head in, Beaumont compressed her lips instead. She eased herself out of her chair and moved in front of him, until they stood face to face. "You two are more alike than you think. You could give a little yourself, you know. Be a little more receptive, rather than ignite at first provocation."

"Wait until next century, you mean, Lieutenant? With the way Lundy thinks partners work, it's not going to happen. And I don't want to become Texan like the rest of you." La Fiamma brazened out her look, but with his inner turmoil making defiance hard to maintain, he soon looked away.

"You want to play hard ball, Joey, well here are the facts. Stop and think about your career. Two transfers in less than a year. How do you think that will look on your record? What do you think that will imply?"

La Fiamma shrugged. "So it'll set me back a bit. No big deal. I'm a good cop, Joanne. I'll overcome it."

"Yes, Joey," she sighed. "You're a good cop. Hotheaded, but pretty capable. And I don't want to lose you...as a cop or a friend." She paused to let that sink in. When La Fiamma looked away in discomfort, she almost smiled. "There are other alternatives besides leaving, you know. I could team you with someone else."

La Fiamma snapped back to attention. "No."

"I mean it wouldn't do any good," he explained hurriedly. "It'd be the same with any of them. The way things work down here, well, it just ain't my style."

She watched him, wondering if she'd really heard that edge of panic in his voice, mulling over the answer she should give.

La Fiamma shifted uncomfortably in the silence. "Look, Joanne, Lundy's the best you've got," he admitted. "I don't want to work with less than that. I'd rather just make a clean break. Right now. Before I have reasons to stay."

Beaumont reflected on how much she had learned to like the young man in front of her. She could see the plea in his eyes. *Do I have the right to make this so difficult for him?* she asked herself.

Contemplative, she started to return to her chair, then paused and looked back at him. *You couldn't stand it if*

something happened to Levon and you weren't there to back him up, could you? It's come that far, hasn't it?

It was what she had always hoped for whenever she had to weather their storms, but... Unfortunately she knew only too well how it felt. She swung her chair around and sat down.

You've learned early that partners never leave you, haven't you, Joey? When she saw the young man fidget under her steady gaze, she picked up the nearest object. The pen was a good distraction and she ran her fingers along it while she considered what to do.

Besides, an inner voice reminded her, *do you really want to handle him with a partner less capable than Lundy?*

"Look, Joey, it's almost the weekend already. I can't do anything about this until next week. Why don't you go finish up what you're doing and think about it. Let me know on Monday."

La Fiamma smiled, relaxing for the first time since bounding into Beaumont's office. "I won't be changing my mind, Lieutenant." He looked at her for a moment, then nodded in resignation. "Okay. I've got paperwork to clear up anyway." He walked to the door, then paused. Turning back, he mumbled, "Look, thanks, Joanne. Okay?" Then he fled, leaving her to stare after him.

I hope you two work it out this weekend, Joey. Or I'll have to grant your request. I would've thought that you were too young to understand that emotions can drive wedges between people... that whenever that happens, nothing's ever the same again. Even a casual meeting in the corridor has uncomfortable undertones of what could have been.

A few minutes later, Lundy appeared and sat on the edge of his partner's desk. Determined to ignore him, La Fiamma kept his eyes on the open folder in front of him and continued to write.

"La Fiamma," Lundy began. "I'm--"

"Lundy," Beaumont called from her open doorway. Annoyed at the ill-timing, he was tempted to tell her to wait, until he caught her eye. She motioned for him to join her.

Nodding reluctantly to her, his gaze slid first to his partner, who looked up and watched him. Noting that La Fiamma's expression neither helped nor hindered him, Lundy frowned at the atypical silence, jumped off the desk, and stepped into the lieutenant's office.

"Shut the door, Levon," she said, crossing the room to sit at her desk.

As Lundy complied, he caught the blue eyes watching and held them until they slid away. It occurred to him that it was rare to see his partner's face so unreadable, but before he could digest that, he heard the lieutenant speak.

"Tell me who you want for a new partner, and I'll consider it, Levon."

Lundy's head snapped around. "What?"

"Thought that'd get your attention. Read this." She handed him a piece of paper and watched as he perused it.

A cursory read was enough to inflame his already smouldering temper. "Oh, for Chris--Joanne, you don't take this seriously, do you?" He tossed it back on her desk.

"He does."

"Yeah, sure. If he goes back to Chicago, he's a dead man."

"Chicago isn't the only place in the country, Levon. Even you should know that."

"According to him, it is. What does he think, he can walk into any police force he wants and be accepted with open arms?"

Retrieving the transfer request let her hedge a moment. She turned it around and spread it out in front of her. Then she met his eyes. "He's a good cop, Levon. You work with him, so you know that. You know how his record reads. His test scores."

"And two transfers in less than six months? Will look **real** good on his sheet," he replied with a nod. "About as good as his personality."

"He's willing to risk it. He'll get by and we three all know it." She paused to let that sink in. "So let's talk about you. Who should I team you with?"

"I already have a partner. And he's going nowhere." Lundy's voice was adamant. He turned his head to glare out the window, as if that would convey the message to his recalcitrant partner.

"You may not have much choice."

"We'll see about that." Lundy turned and strode to the door, all thoughts of apology forgotten. Beaumont's voice caught him just as he turned the handle.

"I didn't dismiss you, Sergeant," she said firmly and waited until he dropped his hand and turned back to face her. "If you go charging out there with that look on your face, you two are going to blow the room apart."

"He isn't leaving, I'll see to that. I wasn't crazy about being partnered with him in the beginning, but he's turned out to be better than I expected. In fact, he's the best we've got. You and I both know that and to lose--."

"Are you going to tell him that?" she asked, interrupting him.

Startled, Lundy studied her for a moment and then smiled. "Never. He thinks too much of himself already."

"Too stubborn by half. Both of you," Beaumont chastised, but her eyes twinkled. "Look, Levon, you're my friend, and I care about you," she continued gently. "Despite the fireworks, you two can work magic together. But one of you needs to give in. Whatever happened between you two to cause this--you're going to have to talk out."

Lundy turned back to the door and rested his hand on the knob. "It's blackmail, Joanne. That's all this is."

"I think it's more than that or I wouldn't bother. Question is, what's more important to you?"

Lundy was silent for a long time, staring at the door knob. "I'm not breaking in a new partner, that's for sure," he stated firmly and yanked the door open.

Lundy came to a halt in front of his partner. "Grab your jacket and let's go."

The answer came without La Fiamma looking up. "I'm busy."

"Time to hit the streets again, partner." He removed the pen from La Fiamma's hand and tossed it aside.

"I'm not your partner anymore, Lundy," he replied, meeting the other's eyes as he closed the file folder. "Get someone else to go with you....You've made it clear I can't help you."

"Shift's not over, La Fiamma. And your transfer hasn't gone through yet." Reaching around La Fiamma, he yanked the jacket from the back of the chair and held it out to the other man.

Making no move to take the jacket, La Fiamma looked at the clock and then back at Lundy.

"We can have it out right here," Lundy said softly. "But they all have good memories and you'll be working a long time with them." For emphasis, he glanced up and around, confident that the blue eyes would follow his.

La Fiamma's expression tightened briefly, then in one motion, he rose from the chair and took the jacket from Lundy. Slinging it over his shoulder, he followed the other man's lead. Not until they reached the Jimmy did he say, "I won't be here to worry about it."

"Wrong," Lundy returned, opening the door without sparing him a glance. "You're going nowhere! Except back on the street. With me." He ended discussion by sliding into the driver's seat and pulling the door shut.

Shouldering into his jacket, La Fiamma crossed to the other side of the truck. "I wouldn't count on it," he retorted as he climbed in. Lundy's smirk made him slam the door.

They drove through the streets fast and in silence. Keeping his attention on the buildings that seemed to speed by, La Fiamma tried not to think about the man who sat beside him or why it mattered.

Driving almost by rote, Lundy had his mind on what he knew he had to do. But knowing didn't end the resentment...or the apprehension.

Hey, what planet is this? On Earth where I come from, partners stick with each other.

We're partners, La Fiamma--we ain't Siamese twins.

The words echoed over and over in his mind. Where in the rule book did it say he had to bare his soul?

Question is, what's more important to you?

I'm not breaking in a new partner, that's for sure.

Perhaps it would just be better if he did. Find one who wouldn't barge into uninvited places.

Lundy stole a glance at his partner, cognizant that La Fiamma's gaze was fixed firmly on the outside scenery. The drumming of fingers against the armrest was almost a trademark of a La Fiamma disturbed, but now, every line in his body spoke of lack of compromise. Lundy finally realized why Joanne was so concerned.

Lundy frowned. His breathing intensified as it always did when he felt trapped, engulfed in an invisible box that threatened to overwhelm him. There had always been one escape...and...and...

...perhaps unconsciously he had been heading there all along. At least the Jimmy was rolling in the right direction.

Finally, La Fiamma couldn't stand it any longer. "Where're we going?"

"Sit tight. You'll see."

"That doesn't cut it any more, Lundy. I'm tired of it. Shift's almost over. Drop me off at home." When no answer came from the driver's seat, La Fiamma clenched his fist and mumbled to himself, "Damn you, Lundy."

The soft expletive made Lundy grin but he kept driving. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the other slouch down in the seat and guessed that La Fiamma'd decided to table argument for the time being. He had no illusions, though, that the worst was over.

Suddenly, La Fiamma roused himself. "Lundy, this looks like the way to your place."

"Brilliant detective work. I need to get something from home." Half-expecting an explosion, he held his breath and waited, relieved when La Fiamma just turned his head to gaze back out the window.

The light was already taking on the lavender hue of dusk when the Jimmy rolled to a stop in front of the house. Lundy killed the engine. Releasing his seatbelt, he noticed that his passenger made no similar move.

"More comfortable to wait inside, La Fiamma. And this may take a while."

"Whassamatter, Lundy? Afraid I'll make off with your tank here?"

Dangling the keys betweem them, Lundy smiled. "Not unless hot-wiring a truck is among your <u>few</u> talents."

With a grin, La Fiamma climbed out of the truck, then turned back and winked before shutting the door. "Piece of cake, Lundy."

<u>Figures.</u> Lundy thought, stifling a grin. Then he found himself hustling to beat La Fiamma to the door.

La Fiamma wandered around until he got curious about what Lundy was doing. The bedroom door was open, so he took that as an invitation to walk in. "Packing?"

Lundy tossed a small case into the carry-all and looked up. "Yeah, a few things we'll need--"

"We?"

Instead of answering, Lundy studied what his companion was wearing, pleased to see it wasn't one of the fancy suits. The black Levis would be more suitable for traipsing around the woods. He had never studied his partner's physique to determine if they could wear each other's clothes, but now he noted how the form-fitting Levis stretched over the slender hips and thighs and tried to gauge size.

When La Fiamma fidgeted in reaction to his scrutiny, he pointed to a pair of jeans that were lying on the bed near where his guest stood. "You might need a change of clothes. Try those on. They never did fit me right, but it was too much bother to take 'em back."

"I've a whole wardrobe of clothes at home, Lundy."

Yeah, and I'm not letting you anywhere I might have trouble getting you out of again, he remarked to

himself. Aloud, he said, "We've got a long drive ahead of us--I don't want to waste time going back into the city."

"Just where do you think I'm going with you?"

"'Bout time you learned what Texas is all about."

"What for? I'm not planning on staying here."

"Sure, you are," Lundy replied, with a nod and a wink. "You just haven't accepted the fact yet. This is your home town now--better get used to it."

"You're nuts, Lundy." La Fiamma put his hands in his jacket pockets and leaned back against the doorframe with no intention of cooperating.

The Texan sighed. "La Fiamma, you could prickle a porcupine. What great plans did you have for this weekend anyway? Can't you give this a chance? You may learn something to change your mind."

The underlying appeal reached La Fiamma. Shrugging his shoulders to relieve the tension, he looked down at his feet. He scuffed his heel over the carpeting, thinking.

Beaumont's words came back to him, and he fidgeted as he considered them. He blinked and moistened his lips, transferring his gaze to the point where the ceiling met the opposite wall.

Will saying yes earn me your trust, Levon?

For a while, Lundy just watched him and waited. When La Fiamma finally faced him with a question in his eye, he could only break the silence with one of his own.

"You coming with me?"

The blue eyes clouded momentarily, then cleared. "Yeah. Sure. Why not?" Sweeping an open hand across his forehead, he brushed back the unruly dark hair. The open smile Lundy gave him could not help but elicit one in return and his tension eased. With an almost imperceptible shake of the head, he picked up the jeans.

His mood improved by the acquiescence, Lundy watched the gesture and felt a twinge of guilt at railroading the other man. Now that the most difficult part had been done and La Fiamma convinced to come along, it couldn't hurt to take him home first, could it?

"If you'd rather, we could stop at your place," he offered in conciliation, gesturing.

La Fiamma eyed him neutrally, then shrugged. "We may as well see if it's necessary first."

Elated, Lundy nodded and turned back to rummaging in the closet.

"Well, I suppose they'll do."

At the words Lundy looked up to see his partner stretching and turning in front of the mirror.

Do? Lundy thought, as he watched the graceful movements. *They look splendid on you.* They were tighter than those La Fiamma usually wore but the snugness only accented the flatness of the ass and the slim firm lines of the thighs. Combined with the broad chest and strongly muscled arms, it made for one hell of an attractive package. *You ought to wear jeans more often, man. Instead of hiding under all that mod loose stuff. We could sell you on street corners.*

He silently snickered at the last thought, but sobered up when La Fiamma favored him with a sour look.

The twinkle in Lundy's eye was one La Fiamma was sure he didn't want explained. A sudden thought made him grin in return. "You don't expect me to wear one of your shirts as well, do you?"

"I got something here from college days that should do the trick," the Texan said, stuffing a jersey into the cover-all.

"If it says Texas A & M, you're dead meat, Lundy."

Lundy grinned and shook his head. By the time he looked up again, La Fiamma was dressed back in his own clothes and ready to toss him the jeans.

They drove for hours through the countryside before they stopped at a little local store for supplies. If it wasn't for the unfamiliar scenery, La Fiamma would have wondered if Lundy couldn't be heading for Mexico. That trip hadn't taken much longer.

It was late when they reached the store, but the owner recognized Lundy and seemed unruffled at being

disturbed. By the time they left, La Fiamma was already mulling over the storekeeper's words. It was apparent that his partner was well-thought of and liked, but it was also clear that the man hadn't seen Lundy since his wife had been killed.

When next the Jimmy rolled to a stop, only moonlight marked the road through the trees. The cabin they stopped in front of was quiet, a dark structure softly illuminated against a black background. For a city boy used to headlights being superfluous in a wash of light, the thought of turning off the truck's high beams was faintly disturbing. And the house seemed to know, to mock the fear.

"My cabin," Lundy answered when La Fiamma turned toward him. "'Fraid it's apt to be a bit musty. I've a caretaker look in on it now and again. Clear the dust out and such. But I don't use it much so I've never worried about it."

Why not? La Fiamma wondered, but didn't ask. It was a puzzle that he told himself he didn't care to solve, wouldn't need to know in the future.

As soon as he entered the main room, La Fiamma understood what Lundy meant. Even though a flick of a switch flooded the area with light, it felt cold beyond the chilliness of the room...untouched...as if abandoned long ago by people who would never return. He shook the feeling off. *What are we doing here, Levon?*

Putting the packages down on the table, Lundy moved to the fireplace, only to discover a dearth of firewood.

"Damn!" he muttered, rummaging around to determine what else might be missing. "I hope Toby's remembered to cut some." He turned and looked over to see what his partner was doing.

La Fiamma was reconnoitering the rooms, partially out of ingrained security precautions and partially out of curiosity. "One bedroom, Lundy?" he queried when he felt his partner's eyes on him.

"Typical in cabins like this one," Lundy confirmed. "It's mainly used for hunting." Pausing to study his inquisitive guest, Lundy noted the lack of comprehension in the blue eyes. He watched the other roll his shoulders and turn away before continuing.

"Guess you're too citified to know about things like hunting parties. When you're late to bed drinking and rise with the dawn, it makes no difference who's sharing the other half in the hours between. But I was planning on using the couch." He gestured to the afghan covered settee that fronted the fireplace. "Quite comfy, actually. I'd better go see if any firewood's been cut."

After he left, La Fiamma continued to tour the cabin, getting the feel of things. The curtains on the window were frilly, with tiny orange and yellow flowers. The empty vases scattered around were derelict reminders of days when they brightened the room with splashes of color.

The detective's attention was drawn to the table in one corner--to the framed photographs standing silent vigil. Several were of his partner and of his wife--most of them individual shots obviously taken there. It was as if they diaried the quiet times spent together, reflecting happier days.

Others were family shots, which caught La Fiamma's notice more for the fact that they seemed to have been taken everywhere but here. Except for the one of Lundy's famous grandfather. Tyler Lundy.

Picking up the photograph, he gazed at the man who leaned up against the fireplace. When that bit of connection had been first hinted at, La Fiamma had tried to look up what he could on the Texan legend, without letting on to Lundy. But for such a well-known man, there was precious little written on him. Probably because Texans didn't read, La Fiamma had often mused.

A hunting lodge? La Fiamma asked himself. *This whole place cries out with a woman's touch...and the lack of it. Why haven't you been here since she died? Why come back now?*

Replacing the photograph, he studied the grouping as if it could unlock the secrets of his partner's soul. Especially the ones taken where they were now. *Why have you brought me here, Levon?*

Caroline's smile caught his attention and he compared it to a photo in which his partner looked tired even though he was grinning. Worn out, as if in need of a vacation.

Her death hurt you bad, didn't it, partner? La Fiamma asked the image in the frame. But it was more than that he realized as he scanned the grouping. No matter which one he looked at, there was always a trace of sadness in the eyes regardless of how wide the smile.

We try to balance on wires
We try to live between the lines
Our love is cautioned with errors
We may learn but it may take some time...
It's not something you wear on your sleeve
No tears for people to see
The hurt that comes from inside is damaging me...

Daltrey's voice floated through his mind as he fingered the photos. *But she hurt you worse when she was alive, didn't she?* The conclusion startled him, but he knew with inner certainty it was true. Fragments of conversations merged with shimmering images gleaned almost unconsciously over the past months.

For a long time he stood there, pondering what life might have been like with a woman driven to drink, perhaps out of loneliness with a husband whose work was too much his mistress, until it drove them both into their own separate shells.

Suddenly he knew he had been given a mirror into his partner's past. *Is this why you're afraid to get close to anybody, Levon? Afraid to trust anyone_again? What is this place?* His gaze traveled over the room again, demanding explanation out of the cold walls.

Cold, no, warm. A haven, then.

Is that what this cabin is, Levon? A haven? A place you went to...to rebuild your marriage...whenever it started falling apart...a place to escape to...to start over...when you couldn't cope in Houston...is this where you went when you were desperate? The thoughts were tumbling over themselves in their eagerness to emerge.

And is this why you haven't been back? Because the good memories are too painful when you can't mend the past? It had to be the answer, for Lundy wasn't trying to forget Caroline. Her photographs were all over his house, were all over the trailer where he was staying when they were first partnered.

La Fiamma felt as barefoot as the man in Daltrey's song, walking over razors just as sharp.

Are you desperate now, Levon?

The thought came out of nowhere and hit La Fiamma in the gut. The idea that Lundy could only be here to mend things again left him weak.

Does it matter to you that much? The thought was humbling. All the residual anger drained out of him and he looked at the furnishings with new eyes. It was a gift that made him feel disgusted with himself and unworthy of the offering.

Lundy paused in the doorway and watched his guest study the photographs. The typical behavior made him shake his head fondly. *You're worse than having a cat, La Fiamma, the way you get into everything.* Though the thought amused him, he kept it to himself.

A cat. *Wonder what you'd say if I came and scratched your ears.*

Sobering up before he drew attention to himself, Lundy crossed over to the fireplace and hunkered down beside it to pile the logs inside.

Well-trained in hearing even the slightest noise, La Fiamma came out of his reverie the moment Lundy entered the room. Nevertheless he remained silent as his partner dealt with the fire, knowing that they couldn't leave talking much longer.

And if the battle should start to tear us apart
We won't go to war no more.

The lyrics drifted on his consciousness and became a promise to himself. Lundy's voice roused him.

"It should warm up shortly." The way La Fiamma was looking at him was beginning to unnerve Lundy, but he forced himself to maintain equilibrium and gestured toward the couch. "In the meantime you may as well make yourself at home."

"Have been looking around," La Fiamma acknowledged, turning back toward the table. "Especially at these." Aware that he had Lundy's attention, he reached over and removed the photograph of the grandfather. Fingering it lightly, he looked back at his partner and met his eyes. Grazing his bottom lip with his teeth helped steady his nerves and let him take the plunge.

"If I'm going to stay here, don't you think it's time I know the local legends?"

With breath held in, La Fiamma waited for Lundy's reaction.

The moment stretched out as Lundy remained still. Scarcely believing what he heard, he looked a question to his partner. A slight nod accompanied the twitch of La Fiamma's mouth and shoulder and made Lundy smile.

To La Fiamma, the expression that answered him seemed devastating in its intensity and flooded him with warmth. For a moment it rendered him powerless to react, then he responded in kind.

The import of the words hung between them until a crackle from the fireplace shattered the silence and drew twin attentions. When next their eyes met, the crinkle of La Fiamma's brow and slight head movement reminded Lundy of the question waiting to be answered.

The brown eyes darkened slightly. He had almost been able to forget why they had come. *Right to the point as always, aren't you?* Lundy mentally remarked to the man in front of him, unable to control the feeling of being pressured. Unconsciously combing his fingers through his hair, he took a deep breath and acknowledged to himself it was time.

"Yeah," he responded as he noted La Fiamma's gaze, but fell silent as he hauled himself up. Why he found it so hard to talk to La Fiamma when he had no trouble entrusting his life to his partner, he didn't understand. Maybe it had something to do with how important the other man had become....

Needing time to collect his thoughts and decide what to say, the Texan went to the parcels on the table and pulled out two beers. Knowing La Fiamma was watching him didn't make it easier.

Once he had them open, he handed one to La Fiamma, who was displaying more patience than he usually showed. Lundy was grateful for that as he took the photo from his friend's hand and studied it.

"This was taken on my first deer hunt. You ever brought one down?" The question was meant as rhetorical and Lundy did not wait for a reply. "It isn't easy to get used to. I'd no trouble shooting rabbits and squirrels. But deer are such beautiful creatures...

"Afterwards, Granddaddy took me aside and explained the cycles of life. It was my first lesson in the discrimination of killing. 'Til then, I'd admired him fiercely, but I'd never really understood what he was about." He paused as he set the frame back in its honored place. "He gave us this cabin when we married. Caroline loved it."

The mention of his wife's name brought another pause.

The silence gave La Fiamma time to note the vulnerability in the other's pose. That pain seemed to hang in the air made the young man wonder which was the more forbidden ground. "Lundy, if your grandfather'd been like mine, I'd understand you not wanting to talk about him. But yours you can be proud of. Tell me what he was like...." he encouraged, hoping that neutral ground would make it easier for Lundy to continue.

The request roused Lundy from his thoughts. Instead of answering, he moved back to the packages and began to sort the items out. When La Fiamma moved to help him, he began to speak.

"Tyler Lundy didn't have to waste hours tracing endless dope shipments trying to keep crack off the streets like we do, but there were gun-runners aplenty back then. There was always trouble in the border towns and people eager to take advantage of it. Once he and his partner believed a family named Colfax to be at the center of a major operation. They were powerful people and no one on the force would credit Granddaddy's suspicions. He tried to get an undercover operation going, but no one would authorize it. So he and his partner worked extra hard on it. Followed leads no one would pay attention to. Never let the case rest."

"Mounted their own operation," La Fiamma thought aloud, before he could stop himself. "Without backup."

Lundy turned back from the half-opened refrigerator to scowl at the implied accusation. Tensing, La Fiamma cursed his too quick tongue, sure that Lundy would clam up. Instead, the scowl softened into a slight curve as Lundy remarked offhandedly, "Yeah, sounds like someone else, doesn't it?

"Let's just say they kept digging deeper and deeper," he chided. "On their own time."

By the time Lundy had finished the story, La Fiamma had changed his mind. Impressed, he whistled softly. "Quite a hero, wasn't he?"

Lundy's lips twitched. "Averted a war with Mexico. Some people were grateful, I should think."

While they continued to unpack and tidy up the kitchen, Lundy told stories that made the Chicago-bred street kid envy his partner's history, know why the old man was such a big influence on Lundy, and wish he could have met the real man first hand.

It wasn't long before they were finished and just leaning up against the table. Much as he wanted to listen to more talk of rescued hostages, daring arrests while looking down a gun barrel, and spectacular public service, La Fiamma knew he couldn't afford to waste the openness he had achieved with Lundy. Yet he wasn't sure that if he redirected the conversation to more critical matters, he wouldn't lose what he had gained.

"They used to say it only took one Ranger to clean up a town, and once my granddaddy did just about the same. Texas is a big state and there are never enough lawmen around. Not to cover all the small towns and open ranges. Money talked even louder back then than today. Well, one time..."

Taking the coward's way out, La Fiamma busied himself getting an apple.

"Is this one of those tall Texan tales I keep hearing about?" La Fiamma asked incredously, interrupting halfway through the recital.

Giving La Fiamma a wounded look, Lundy took the uneaten core from his partner's hand and tossed it away. "Would I lie to you?" Grabbing a couple more beers, he suggested they move to the couch.

As he led the way, La Fiamma assuaged his regret with the promise to get the rest out of Lundy at a later date. Upon sitting down, he took a deep breath and pounced as soon as Lundy settled in.

"I noticed your grandfather was wearing a pair of Colts in the photo, Levon," La Fiamma prodded gently. It was enough to make Lundy stiffen, so he let his voice fade and he waited.

It wasn't long before Lundy flared under the steady gaze. "Lawmen like him usually did, but that isn't what you're asking, is it? Okay. That Colt of mine did belong to my granddaddy and he gave it to me not long after that photo was taken."

"So why didn't you want to tell me about it? Didn't you think I'd understand why it was important to you? I can, you know, even if I don't have anything like it myself."

He paused, unable to continue meeting his partner's gaze. Lowering his eyes, he played with the corner of the afghan.

"Look, man, I'm sorry. I shoulda recognized there was more to it than just a gun. I shoulda been more help."

"You were, La Fiamma."

The defense was immediate and made Lundy realize the truth of it. "You came anyway," he continued softly, "and that means more than you know. You were there when I needed you to be."

The acknowledgement made La Fiamma's head jerk up and their eyes met and held. Then Lundy shrugged. "Besides, it doesn't really matter any more. The gun is gone."

"Yeah, because **you** threw it away. All that crap we went through and you tossed it like yesterday's trash. But it wasn't yesterday's trash, was it? 'Twas your link to your grandfather and was important. Is important. It's still eating at you and I understand even less what's going on. Don't you think that if you'd try trusting me... just once... I might be able to help?"

And maybe you'd turn away...

His stomach tightening at the risk honesty could be, Lundy disregarded the appeal in the other's voice. Deliberately transfering his gaze to the beer in his hand, he toyed with the bottle, making slow circles in the air. A long swallow hid his thoughts. Finally, he shook his head. "It isn't a question of trust, but everyone's got things he's not proud of...things he'd rather not talk about. Can't you respect that?"

La Fiamma eyed him levelly. "Yeah, I can respect privacy and I don't want to know anything you don't want to tell me. But if you can't trust me with yourself, maybe you should look for a partner you can trust."

The words were quiet, but their implications shouted unmistakably. The gaze Lundy gave him was searching. "Don't you think you're asking for more than partnership intended?"

"Do you really want to be like McCandless and Sutton? I'da hoped my partner would want more."

The analogy startled Lundy, driving home a choice that only he could make. "I do, but...okay, maybe you're right. Maybe you do have a right to know, but it isn't

pretty. It wasn't just a gun Granddaddy entrusted to me, it was..."

When Lundy paused, La Fiamma nodded encouragement, settling back in silence to just listen. Hoping to make it easier on the Texan, he pretended interest in the beer in his hand. It was only his second one, but already he was eyeing it with distaste. With utmost care, he placed the almost full bottle on the side table.

"You know, he even insisted I use both hands to hold it," Lundy began, letting the memory unfold.

"...'Now this one's been 20 years on the Force. It's not once been fired for the wrong reason....'"

The implications of the words arrested La Fiamma's attention and he almost missed when the story ended.

"Lundy, your gun didn't make that kid go bad. It woulda happened sooner or later."

"That isn't the point."

"What is?"

"It's me. You were right all along. The gun's just a hunk of cheap steel, yet I let it become more important than a living being. I pushed and pushed...until it cost the life of a young boy."

"You aren't responsible for his death, Lundy." At Lundy's snort, he reached over and clutched the other's shoulder, shaking it fervently. "You're not, you hear me. He made his own choices. It was he who killed people, not your gun. You're a cop, Lundy. You'da had to go after him whether he had your Colt or not.

"You did the right thing and I'm not going to let you tear yourself apart because of it. You're wrong to blame yourself, Levon, just like I was wrong, before."

A shake of the head indicated that Lundy didn't agree. "How can you say that? You only told me what any good cop would say--what I'd say if it were you going off half-cocked. It was me who wouldn't listen." He paused, for the words almost made him choke, but once unleashed, the guilt could not be silenced.

"I was so dead set on getting that gun back," he murmured, almost to himself, "it almost didn't matter what I had to do to get it. Dammit, La Fiamma," he grated, glaring at his partner, "I almost traded **your** life for that hunk of steel."

The image of La Fiamma lying blood-splattered in the dust shimmered before him. Knowing that he'd be reponsible for that horror made him unable to go on.

"Is that bugging you too? Why you're afraid to talk to me? My own stupidity got me caught." The tight voice interrupted Lundy's thoughts. "Even a rookie coulda done better," he berated himself bitterly.

"No, you can't expect to read minds, La Fiamma," Lundy interjected in his defense. "You can only go with your best judgment. We all make bad guesses sometimes. Besides, it still doesn't change anything. It may not have happened at all if I hadn't pushed it. Maybe if I'd been more open to reason, he wouldn't have felt cornered, wouldn't have spooked."

"You don't know that. And second-guessing about it is useless...okay, maybe as useless as me going over what I coulda done. Maybe you should heed your own words. You know the bit about doing the best we can."

"Doesn't it bother you at all that a hunk of cheap steel almost cost you your life?"

Tempted to remind Lundy that they both lived on the edge of death every day, La Fiamma looked down and said nothing. The passion in the outpouring made him realize that that made no difference to how Lundy felt. Trouble was, he could understand Lundy's attitude all too well, and he didn't know any answers for it either, except that he was still there.

Knowing he had to say something, La Fiamma almost had the words out when he was interrupted by Lundy.

"I hear what you're saying, partner, but I can't help feeling I let an object become more valuable than a human life." *...and in the end, not just any life either,* Lundy thought, feeling more than just the shame of betraying the legacy of his grandfather's selfless public service.

If he were going to risk lives...to endanger his partner's life... it ought to be for something more worthy...

Though not privy to the thoughts, La Fiamma had no trouble reading the emotion that lined Lundy's face. "Okay," he sighed, "so you ain't the shiny-starred cowboy on a white horse you think you oughta be. And I ain't the hotshot cop I think I should be. If you can

allow me mistakes, why can't you allow yourself the same leeway?"

"Look who's talking," Lundy interrupted.

Exasperated, La Fiamma ignored him. "It doesn't mean your grandfather'd be less proud of you. Don't you think he ever made a mistake? Don't you think he'd understand?"

Unable to sit still any longer, Lundy jumped up and went to the kitchen. Opening another beer, he glanced over to the couch, but didn't return to it. Instead, he moved to the fireplace to jab at the logs until the flames threatened to spill over. Tossing the poker aside, he stalked over to the table of photographs. He wanted to reject the words outright and yell at La Fiamma for lecturing him, but the unerring accuracy of his partner's observations wouldn't be denied.

The internal argument in the ebullient man did not escape La Fiamma. He watched carefully as he added, "Levon, consider what happened a lesson well-learned. Isn't the important thing how you apply it tomorrow?"

"The price of self-knowledge isn't cheap," Lundy answered, as if quoting scripture.

"Never is," La Fiamma said to the retreating back, then fell silent as he watched Lundy pace the room. When he saw the shrugged gesture of supplication, he became confident that his words were being weighed and he wished there was something more he could add to make it easier.

Unfortunately, waiting for Lundy to draw the proper conclusions left La Fiamma with too much time for contemplation.

"Just do me a favor and forget what I said," La Fiamma finally entreated, averting his eyes so Lundy couldn't witness his turmoil. "I never shoulda called your Colt a hunk of cheap steel. It never was and never will be."

The ashamed tones reached Lundy just as he came to final terms with what had happened. His pacing ended, he had paused to stretch out his kinks before sharing what he had worked out. The hushed plea brought him to an abrupt stop. As he turned, Lundy could only see the bowed head and he crossed the room in hurried strides.

When his approach didn't seem to register on La Fiamma, he hovered behind the couch to study the other's posture. La Fiamma was sitting almost on one hip with his back pressed into the corner of the sofa. One leg was tucked under the other and the arm that rested on the top of the couch's backrest propped up the bowed head.

After a moment, Lundy perched himself on the same curvature of the couch within arm's length of touching the other man. Even so, La Fiamma took no apparent notice of him. The air of depression reminded him how typical it was for La Fiamma to lecture another...and pay no mind himself. The absurdity made him shake his head.

"No, you weren't wrong, partner," Lundy said, rough affection tinging his voice. "You were teaching me something I was too blind to see on my own." Pausing, he deliberately waited for La Fiamma to turn to face him. In the interim, he decided that his partner deserved nothing less than total honesty.

Jerking his head around, La Fiamma lowered his arm in the same motion, letting it stretch across the space between them until they were almost touching. To hide his bewilderment, he shifted slightly, then looked over and met the brown eyes questioningly.

"You taught me that a gun is not my grandfather. What he stands for is in...what we do every day."

He waited until the understanding was obvious in La Fiamma's expression, then he softly added, "I no longer need it to link me to my granddaddy. What I have now does that far better than the Colt ever could."

La Fiamma stared at him for a long time without saying anything.

So long that Lundy soon needed to escape the intensity of the mute scrutiny. A glance at the bottle in his hand reminded him that it was empty and he took great care in setting it down next to the abandoned one. Casting around for another diversion, he suddenly realized how light it had become.

"Look, we've just about talked the night away. Maybe we should get some sleep now. Especially since..." he let his words trail off as his lips formed a smirk. "...I promised to show you Texas."

"Threatened more like," La Fiamma corrected, but there was warmth in his voice. "Don't remind me."

Still La Fiamma made no effort to move, so Lundy winked at him. "You're sitting on my bed," he pointed out.

Though the hint was obvious, La Fiamma didn't immediately take it. After a moment, he said, "Uh, why don't you take the bedroom? I don't mind sleeping on the couch."

When Lundy shook his head, La Fiamma almost bit his tongue. "Sorry," he murmured in apology. "I guess the memories are still too painful, aren't they? You can see her hand out here everywhere so I suppose--"

Lundy's groan cut him off. "Don't ask much, do you? Leave it for another day, La Fiamma. Enough's enough."

"Another day?"

"Yeah." The grin that accompanied it held sufficient promise to elicit one in return. "Now, go to bed," he chided when he saw La Fiamma nod.

Mumbling a bouncy good night, La Fiamma hauled himself to his feet, stretching before turning to head towards the bedroom.

"La Fiamma."

The soft call reached him at the doorway and he paused, turning.

"Glad you're staying, man."

Touched, La Fiamma grinned, content enough to wink at his partner. "Me, too, cowboy."

Lundy smiled before pointing to the door.

As he unfolded the afghan to double as a blanket, fluffed up a pillow, and kicked off his boots, Lundy could hear La Fiamma poking around in the other room. The normality of it amused and comforted him, and as he drifted off to sleep among the welcome sounds, he didn't ponder why it never bothered him to have this insatiable busybody pry into his things.

"Is it still morning?"

"Just barely," Lundy replied, turning from the stove to face the new arrival. What he saw made him draw up short. Standing in the doorway was La Fiamma in the borrowed clothing.

Having just guessed at which top to select, Lundy's first thought was consideration of his choice. Though his concern had only been to find something that would fit the more muscular frame, he couldn't help but notice the results, for the short-sleeved jersey was tight enough to compliment the rippling muscles as much as the close-fitting jeans did, and its deep-blue color reflected the vivid eyes.

Even as these facts registered on his consciousness, Lundy's attention was drawn more to the reason behind La Fiamma's decision to wear them. In spite of offering them as an option, the Texan really didn't expect his partner to don them unless La Fiamma absolutely had to.

La Fiamma crossed the room, a hint of a smile playing across his lips, as if he were expecting the reaction to his caprice.

Catching the familiar crinkle, Lundy turned back to the stove, busying himself with the coffee pot to hide what he discerned. "You could've slept in," he remarked, with only his tone betraying his thoughts.

For a moment La Fiamma studied Lundy as the coffee was poured into two cups. Then he shook his head. "Be okay soon as I get that 'n some juice in me," he answered, pulling out the nearest chair. Sliding into it reminded him how restraining molded jeans were. "Damn!" he muttered. "I shoulda never agreed to wear these things. I'll end up doin' myself an injury peeling them off tonight."

"They're not that bad, LaFiamma," Lundy spoke up jocularly, knowing he wasn't meant to hear the comment.

"How would you know?" LaFiamma retorted, slightly embarrassed. "As tight as you wear yours, you probably don't have anything left to injure."

"It's all in the know-how, son. Like everything else."

The tone was such that LaFiamma didn't bother to answer. Instead he threw a glare at the other man and changed the subject. "You been up long?"

"Just long enough to cook up some breakfast," Lundy hedged, pointing to the plates of eggs and bacon. "Look, there's plenty enough for two, but you can have just fruit if you prefer."

La Fiamma shook his head. "S'okay, since you took the trouble. Probably better if we're going to be out all day, checking out..." he deliberately paused, then added, "...where Little Levon played and laid."

Passing the dishes over, Lundy frowned at the smirking young man. "I recall a promise of geography, not history," he reminded La Fiamma.

"Uh uh," La Fiamma negated, "I was promised the personal tour of past and present. Don't think I'd play Texan for a weekend for less, do you?" To forestall a smartassed comeback, he gestured toward his plate to sidetrack Lundy's attention. "I'm impressed. Was beginning to think you couldn't cook."

"With Chicken around, why should I bother?" Turning his attention to his own plate, Lundy mumbled something about partners who must expect fast food chains in the middle of the wilderness.

"You do all right, Lundy," La Fiamma said after some time, nodding toward the food.

The offhand compliment made Lundy regard his partner thoughtfully and regret that only basic staples were available in the country store. "You may have to learn to like it," he pointed out a few moments later. "Sorry I didn't think to stock up before we left Houston. People out here don't pay to buy water."

La Fiamma shrugged. "I'll survive. We both had other things on our minds."

They finished eating in silence, with Lundy considering the soul-baring La Fiamma wanted now. Part of him resented the further intrusion and yet...

It'll give him useful knowledge of the terrain, Lundy told himself, *even if it isn't exactly what I planned. And what else can you do with him for a weekend, other than killing him, that is?*

Lundy watched as La Fiamma carried his plate to the sink and began clearing the table.

Besides, it doesn't need to be only my head under analysis, my friend, Lundy silently warned. *It's just as easy to exact tit for tat out here, especially since there's no electronic gadgetry to hide behind. Just you, me, and nature. We might learn more about where you're coming from than you bargained for.*

The possibilities were sufficiently appealing to gain his agreement and he rose to help La Fiamma finish the cleaning up. What he refused to acknowledge was that part of him was almost eager for what was about to begin.

A glance told Lundy that his partner was outside, fidgeting as usual. The typical impatience made his lips twitch in response, but he took the time to sling a rifle across his shoulder before leaving the main room. Primed earlier that morning, the gun was a caution against the coyotes and cougars which were still known to frequent the area.

Pausing on the porch, Lundy pointed out the mesquites that hid the lake where he used to swim, then began to hike in the opposite direction. As they picked their way carefully through the tangled undergrowth, Lundy spied a clump of many slender stems growing from a common rootstock. Identifying it as a black walnut, he detailed the differences between it and the more common pecan.

To forestall a complete lesson on Texan flora, La Fiamma began identifying the trees and bushes, letting Lundy know he could differentiate between a yucca and a catclaw, a liveoak and a mesquite. Lundy countered by telling La Fiamma of the time he collected the thorns and planted them later in his grandmother's bed.

In return, La Fiamma shared that he had once done much the same thing, except with the thistles he had been forced to dig up in the yard.

It crossed both minds that it might not turn out to be such a bad day.

Used to the heavy forests of the midwest, La Fiamma considered this area to be sparsely wooded, the trees mainly low and spiny, spread out more like bushes. Probably why the Texas heat and humidity followed them even here, he mused, unlike the woods of home, where tall trees filtered the sun and made the air a little cooler. But he'd be damned if he'd spoil anything by complaining.

Yet in places the thicket was also dense enough to make walking difficult, and there were moments when only his athleticism kept his mouth shut. Especially after several scratches from armors of thorns he wasn't vigilant enough to sidestep.

It wasn't long before Lundy realized he was enjoying himself, and little by little out came the childhood memories. Encouraged by La Fiamma's eager responses, Lundy found himself taking his partner to the site where he shot his first deer. Hesitantly describing his reactions on that day, he was amazed to discover that La Fiamma could understand both his pride of accomplishment and his sadness for beauty destroyed.

He showed La Fiamma where the best place to hunt wild turkeys was and when a squirrel scampered up a nearby oak, he offered to get them dinner. The rifle was off his shoulder and almost aimed before La Fiamma got his hands around the barrel.

As soon as La Fiamma's grip tightened, he saw the smirk curl Lundy's lips and knew he had been had.

Frowning in admonishment, La Fiamma gently pushed the rifle down and out of the way before releasing it. With lightening speed, he swung a fist at Lundy's gut.

Though Lundy tried to sidestep the oncoming blow, he couldn't move quickly enough to avoid it. But the mock punch barely tapped when it connected. The gotcha expression that followed it mirrored his own earlier one.

Until the brown eyes acknowledged they were even.

Roaming further on, La Fiamma listened avidly as Lundy recounted incidents in no particular order. Prone to a vivid imagination, La Fiamma drew pictures in his mind of the child in the wooded playground and the boy learning to become a man. Wisely, he kept his thoughts to himself, afraid to lose the open sharing.

After a time, Lundy halted in front of a gnarled oak and stood gazing at it. In the ensuing silence, La Fiamma looked from his partner to the tree and back again. His eyes swept over its spreading branches, but the only significance he could see was its huge size. Since most of the trees seemed little taller than man himself, the fact that it was definitely larger than the rest made it an anomaly in a land which couldn't boast its scrubs to be 'bigger and better', like it did everything else.

"A particular favorite of yours, Lundy?"

Favoring him with a quick glance, Lundy shrugged, "Only that you could see forever from its top."

"Forever?"

"Used to seem that way. C'mon." He started to shimmy up the trunk, then straddling one of the thick branches, he reached down to offer help to his companion, only to be reminded that there were trees in Chicago.

Without any words spoken, it turned into a race for the top, which Lundy easily won. Poised on their separate perches, slightly panting from the exertion, their eyes met and they both broke out in laughter.

"Unfair. You knew the terrain," La Fiamma protested lightheartedly.

"But it was your challenge," Lundy countered.

"Yeah," La Fiamma conceded, shrugging, then whistled at the view.

"Nothing like it in Chicago, is there?" Lundy teasingly baited, following the line of the younger man's sight.

Glancing over quick enough to discern the other's expression, La Fiamma deftly fielded the ball. "No, but it isn't the Sears Tower either, is it? You should see that view."

"Next you'll be telling me you spent your childhood rappelling down its sides," Lundy muttered, annoyed that the Windy City always seemed to come out better in La Fiamma's book.

"Not very likely on that building. But I did sometimes watch the National Guard tackle some of the smaller skyscrapers downtown and--"

"C'mon," Lundy interrupted and began to swing down the tree. When they both reached the ground, he explained he had something else to show La Fiamma and started off.

"Careful," Lundy shouted and swung his arm to bar La Fiamma's path. So quickly did La Fiamma stop that a moment's vertigo hit him. When he could see again, he followed the line of Lundy's sight down to the piece of barbed wire laying where he would next step.

"The past is scattered around us," Lundy explained. "You have to learn to look where you walk." Seeing that La Fiamma didn't make much of it, he added, "If you hit it right, it can be nasty. Didn't you ever read cowboy books as a kid?"

Recalling the childhood stories about cattle tearing themselves apart on the fences, La Fiamma squatted down and gingerly picked up the spiked piece, tossing it deeper into the underbrush.

Soon they were scampering near the edge of a ravine, skirting prickly pear cactus, pushing through thin clumps of hackberries, circling scrubby bushes, and climbing over twisted roots where the wind had blown away the protecting soil. When La Fiamma commented on the shallowness of the arroyo, Lundy explained how it had been cut by a flash flood before he was born and how the waters could still come crashing through without any warning.

It surprised Lundy to realize how well La Fiamma kept up with him. For such a city slicker, he was surprisingly agile in terrain that had to be unfamiliar. About to offer up one of his rare compliments, Lundy was struck by the fine sheen of sweat that covered his partner's face and arms. A more studied look made him realize how much the heat was affecting his partner and yet the young man had offered up no complaints.

Though he was equally sweaty, Lundy hadn't been quite aware of how hot the day was until now and he wondered if they both weren't being foolish to be wandering around in the woods.

"Maybe I should show you where we used to go swimming," Lundy offered and was startled when La Fiamma rounded on him.

"Just cuz I didn't spend my childhood playing backwoodsman, doesn't mean I can't handle it," La Fiamma hissed at him. "In fact, back where I come from, this might look more like open country."

"Sorry, man," Lundy apologized. "I didn't mean anything like that. My clothes are sticking to me, too."

The confession cooled La Fiamma's temper and he apologized in return.

"Besides, I should know better," Lundy drawled, tongue in cheek. "There're forests in Chicago, aren't there?"

La Fiamma started, then realized Lundy was merely poking fun at him.

"Okay, you're right," he admitted sheepishly, "this isn't my territory. I never went hunting or camping, but even city kids these days can play survival games."

"Okay, marauder, let me show you something that isn't like bringing home the flag."

Lundy led the way to a small clearing that ended in a scattered cluster of rocks. There were dark recesses between some of the rock, but none was deep enough to be a proper hollow. When Lundy paused there, La Fiamma looked a question to him.

"There's always a problem with coyotes around here. One winter was particularly cold and forced a coyote to take to harassing livestock all over this area. Even attacked a four year old child. Everyone was out hunting it but the crafty ol' thing always managed to elude us."

"You tracked it here and killed it," La Fiamma guessed. "And you wound up the town hero."

"Thirty pounds of cornered animal is nothing to snicker at, La Fiamma. Fear can give it a deadly edge. The town may have been happy with what I did, but when I got home..."

"They didn't know whether to hug you or hit you," La Fiamma finished for him.

With a flicker of a grin, Lundy turned away and hoisted himself onto the nearest of the rocks. He watched as La Fiamma hunkered down to assess the situation and offered up the specifics to the silent inquiry.

In trying to picture the event being recited to him, La Fiamma scanned the rocks and surrounding ground with a dreamer's vision. Yet the copper's eye for detail also noted the stones scattered over the arid soil and the clumps of grass that occasionally broke its flat features. Almost unconsciously he picked at a shape barely visible in the dirt.

When he had it unearthed, La Fiamma realized it was an arrowhead. Lundy watched him brush off the dirt and recognizing the object, reached over and took it out of his hand.

"Kids spend hours looking for these," he said, flipping it over. "I'm sure they once were scattered all over the

place, but nowadays it takes a lot of luck or savvy. They make good status symbols when you're young."

"Find many?" La Fiamma queried, before he realized he was giving Lundy an opening to brag.

The brown eyes twinkled. "I always held the record. You see, there was this place I found..." His voice faded off, as he changed his mind about talking about it.

"Yes?" La Fiamma prompted, determined not to be shut out.

Lundy glanced at him and shrugged. "Nothing special. I just think the Indians used to come there. A trading post of some sort. Not much left to really tell."

He didn't say it was his favorite place of all, but La Fiamma silently guessed it was.

The silence grew between them as Lundy inspected the arrowhead, thinking about the broken-down ruin that had been his greatest childhood secret.

As he watched the emotions crawl across his partner's face, La Fiamma realized that Lundy had no intention of taking him there. Suddenly it became the most important place in La Fiamma's world. Quietly he told Lundy about wanting to go to Cahokia throughout his childhood and how impressed he was with the Mounds when as a teenager, he finally got there.

The indirect appeal was obvious, but Lundy hesitated. Caroline was the only person he had ever taken there, and...

With patience quickly running out, La Fiamma almost expressed his wishes when he thought better of it. *You did tell him you could respect privacy, didn't you*? he asked himself. *And he's been sharing far more than you expected him to. Can't you be content with that?*

His questions only made La Fiamma feel despondent, so he hauled himself to his feet and escaped to the edge of the clearing. But the answer followed him anyway. Suppressing the desire to punch out the nearest scrub, he turned his anger inward. *Why do you need to know anyway? What difference does it make? Eventually you'll be sent home and it won't mean a thing back there.*

Watching his partner walk away, Lundy was affected by La Fiamma's atypical forbearance and came to a decision. Quietly he joined him.

"It's a couple of miles further up the ravine," Lundy casually remarked, sliding the arrowhead into the pocket of La Fiamma's jeans. "For endurance if not for luck," he teased, when the blue eyes met his.

A flicker of a smile crossed La Fiamma's lips. "With the jogging I usually do? Lead on and we'll see who lasts." He waited until Lundy started off, then called out, "Maybe I should donate it to your collection. Must not be very big."

"You'll live to regret that, my son," Lundy warned him, turning to throw him a glare. Recognizing the pretense, La Fiamma feigned contriteness in return, causing Lundy to chuckle as he started off again. "Besides," he called over his shoulder, "I'm only taking you there because you need to find all the help you can get."

Grinning at his partner's back, La Fiamma followed quietly, using his energy to negotiate the broken terrain that bordered the gulch. Eventually, La Fiamma's thoughts began to stray to what he was learning about his partner.

Concentrating on putting the pieces together, La Fiamma didn't see the innocuous piece of barbed wire until he stepped on its edge. As it whipped up toward his leg, he tried to leap aside. Coming down on his foot awkwardly, he twisted his ankle and lost his balance, falling over the side of the ravine.

Lundy swung around at the noise, in time to see La Fiamma skid down the bank. Frozen in horror for seconds, he could only watch as La Fiamma hit bottom and lay still against a fallen tree.

"Joey!" he yelled, as the accident and stillness simultaneously registered. Panicked, he scrambled and skittered down the slope faster than safety allowed, unaware of the scrapes and bruises the speed exacted.

"Joey!" he called out again as he reached the motionless body. As he hied over to his partner's side, he was relieved to see La Fiamma was not unconscious, but only stunned, with the breath knocked out of him.

The hair that kept falling in La Fiamma's eyes was causing the eye to involuntarily twitch, and with amused tenderness, Lundy brushed it aside for him. Relieved that his partner was alive to make the action

meaningful, Lundy continued the stroke down the dirt-covered cheek without thinking, then laid his hand to rest on the trembling shoulder.

By this time, La Fiamma was trying to move, struggling to catch his breath. The movements were aimless, obviously uncontrolled by the dazed brain.

"Take it easy, Joe," Lundy advised softly. "Just catch your breath first." He massaged the shoulder beneath his hand gently, but whether it was to ease La Fiamma or himself or both he didn't speculate. The labored breathing gradually settled down, and the twitching movements slowly became more coordinated, but when La Fiamma tried to sit up, he couldn't manage it.

"Too soon," Lundy chastised, seeing how weak La Fiamma was. "Don't move." For emphasis he applied a fraction of pressure to the shoulder to keep it down.

When the blue eyes focussed normally, he asked, "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay." But the slow response and slurred words told Lundy how groggy La Fiamma still was.

"Well, rest a moment. We're in no hurry."

As the blue eyes turned to meet his, Lundy let go of La Fiamma's shoulder and shifted until he was more squarely in his partner's line of vision. The eyelids flickered shut and when they opened again, the eyes behind them were much brighter.

"I'm okay," La Fiamma murmured again.

This time the words were clearer and the breathing seemed back to normal. Still it wasn't until La Fiamma reached up and brushed aside the hair that had again fallen into his eyes that Lundy was willing to agree with him.

Watching La Fiamma carefully, Lundy waited for the attempt to sit up and recognized the decision the moment it was made. "All right, let me help you up," he said and reached for the other man's shoulders.

As Lundy helped him sit up, the shift in weight caused La Fiamma to cry out and to immediately fold up in pain. Shuddering in the unexpectedness of it, La Fiamma reached ineffectively toward his foot.

The cry froze Lundy and his gaze followed La Fiamma's huddled stretch. Noticing for the first time that the foot disappeared under a tree branch, he realized it was caught and he steadied La Fiamma's shoulders as he ordered him not to move.

The words didn't immediately penetrate the dull fog that clouded the senses and only the strength of the arms around him checked him. Still slightly disoriented from the fall, La Fiamma didn't yet have the discrimination to gauge the severity of the pain that spun out across his nerves, let alone the clarity of thought to keep still and not make matters worse. Tears welled up in his eyes and he clung to the encircling arms until the intensity faded to a throb.

When the muscles under his hands tensed with self-control, Lundy released La Fiamma and repeating his warning, scooted over to where the foot was caught. Resting one hand against the leg to immobilize it, he cautiously removed the impediments and freed the foot.

La Fiamma couldn't keep quiet when the weight lifted and circulation was completely restored, but the sound was muffled.

"Hold still until I check out the damage," Lundy admonished, preventing La Fiamma from sliding away.

"It'll be okay in a moment. Just aches a bit." He was just about to flex his foot and prove his case when he saw the look on Lundy's face and thought better of it. Curbing his intention obediantly, he said in a small voice, "It's okay, honest. I wouldn't lie to you if it was serious."

The only answer was a skeptical snort as Lundy untied the laces to the policeman workshoes. Earlier the Texan had been grateful they weren't the tassled loafers, but now he almost wished for the others, for they would less painful to remove.

Gingerly removing the leather shoe and sock, Lundy was relieved to see the flesh unbroken. Still the pattern of the sock was clearly impressed on the skin, giving mute testimony to the weight that had been pressing down on it. Inch by inch, Lundy felt the impressed ridges and valleys, applying gentle pressure over the ankle, the arch, and the foot, attentive to any response from the man beside him.

Though the lack of flinching to his probing convinced him the injury wasn't serious, it didn't fool Lundy into believing La Fiamma was all right. He knew that crushing injuries were not to be taken lightly, even if they didn't seem to hurt much.

"No broken bones, but it's bruised badly, partner," Lundy confirmed, releasing the foot. He watched as La Fiamma brought his leg close and bent over it to inspect it himself. "It should get you home all right."

Grabbing the sock, La Fiamma muttered as he put it on. "I told you it was okay, but you don't ever listen. Just ached for a few seconds, that's all. I can walk as well as you can. Can't be much farther to your trading post anyway."

Lundy was reaching for the abandoned shoe when the last comment registered. "La Fiamma--"

"Don't start again, Lundy," La Fiamma warned, yanking the shoe from the extended hand. "A slight bruise doesn't make me an invalid." His building anger made him put the shoe on more forcefully than he intended and he clenched his jaw against the sudden throb.

The slight flinch was not lost on Lundy. "La Fiamma, you can't..." He let his voice trail off as he saw La Fiamma start to push off the ground.

In levering himself up, La Fiamma winced as he misjudged the weight the injured foot would take. He was saved from dropping back by Lundy grabbing him under the elbow and hauling him upright.

"Oh, you're just great, aren't you?" Lundy threw out, frustration making the words more caustic than he intended.

Irritated, La Fiamma shrugged off the help. "If you'd leave me alone, I'd be fine." Testing his footing, he took a few steps to prove his point. "See?"

That La Fiamma was favoring the injured foot was clear to Lundy. Before he could say anything, however, his partner spoke.

"Let's get started before it gets too late."

Hearing the appeal that underscored the words, Lundy hesitated, even though he was aware of how gingerly La Fiamma was standing. His inclination was to follow the sensible course, but when he met his partner's gaze, the look in the blue eyes wavered his resolve.

Lord Almighty, Lundy swore to himself, *what did I ever do to deserve him?* "It's your foot," he said, shrugging. "But if you fall again, you can damn well stay there."

A few steps brought Lundy to where the rifle lay. He quickly slung it around his shoulder, then bent over to scoop up his hat. Hitting it a few times against his pant leg to knock off the dirt, he placed it squarely on his head and didn't look back. Then the Texan scrambled up the grade of the ravine, leaving La Fiamma to work his way as best he could.

As they covered the remaining ground, Lundy found it impossible to remain irritated with his partner. Though he couldn't hide completely the effort walking was taking, La Fiamma kept trying to minimize Lundy's awareness of it with a continual banter of observations, stories, and jibes.

Equally eager to regain the earlier rapport, Lundy held up his end and pretended not to see the favoring gait nor notice when it started to border on a limp. "The clearing is just beyond those trees," he offered quietly, when La Fiamma paused.

La Fiamma glanced sideways at him and shrugged, hooking his thumbs in the waistband of his jeans. "Just stopped to take a closer look."

Lundy grinned. "Yeah, this mesquite's far different than the hundreds of others around here."

La Fiamma bared his teeth in return. "Its thorns might look good around your neck, Lundy."

"You couldn't get 'em off without bleeding half to death," he rejoined as he started off again. Within minutes, they had broken into the clearing and Lundy led the way to the crumbling outpost.

Not all four walls were still standing, but enough blocks remained for La Fiamma to trace out the size and shape of the two rooms. On the back wall of the larger room, an iron-braced fireplace remained, its brick chimney still standing, even if its adobe blocks were blackened forever.

What remained of the other walls showed him that it was built of square type rock, whitish in color even as it deteriorated. He could even see the holes where the wooden frame had been attached, and mourned that wooden beams didn't last the test of time. He walked to the fireplace and kicked at the stones and dust that had settled there, then ran his fingers over the black iron works, marvelling that even something with only a

utilitarian purpose would have such intricate design work.

Leaning the rifle against one of the adobe walls, Lundy levered himself up onto its top. From his perch, he watched La Fiamma explore the place.

"Ever ask anyone about this place? What kind of settlers were here?"

"Nope. If I did, it wouldn't remain mine. There's a narrow river that passes over that way," he said, pointing. "I think the Indians used to come up from there. I used to find a lot of arrowheads along its banks."

From the fireplace, La Fiamma followed the western wall until it crumbled into a waist-high barrier. There he paused and looked toward the trees.

Lundy shifted as he saw La Fiamma stop. "I used to play Texas Ranger here, holding off a whole gang of desperadoes from right where you're standing."

"Really?" La Fiamma crouched down and peered over the top, letting himself get lost in the fantasy. When he became aware that his partner was watching him, he stopped abruptly and came over to sit next to Lundy.

"Yeah, I can see why this'd be your favorite place. You and your friends coulda done a lot of scenes here. Indian attacks. Bandits. Even pretend to be the U.S. Cavalry."

"A lot of battles were staged here," Lundy admitted noncommitally. La Fiamma waited for him to elaborate, but he seemed lost in the past. In the ensuing silence, La Fiamma worked out his own scenarios of a small Lundy at play. Though he found them entertaining, he would have traded them all for a single real one.

"Arrowheads aren't the only things I found here," Lundy said, eventually breaking the silence. "There were too many treasures here to discover. I wasn't about to let others come ransack the place. Bobby often tried to follow me here, but I was too good at tracking to get caught. I doubt the old Indians could've moved any more silently than I did. Often I'd hide nearby and watch him stumble around, looking for me. Then I'd slip away."

He let a few more minutes pass in silence, then added, "Besides, I needed a place to be alone. A place where life could be like you wanted it to be."

La Fiamma glanced quickly at him, then away.

"A place of shadows to dream," La Fiamma murmured almost to himself, as he watched the shade steal across the center of the rooms. "Yeah, I can understand why you'd want to keep it to yourself."

"Caroline's the only one I've ever brought here..." Lundy offered, taking off his hat and combing his fingers through his hair. He brushed the dirt off his jeans, then turned his head to study the profile beside him. "...Until now."

Glancing up sharply, La Fiamma held the gaze, unable to say anything.

After a while, La Fiamma returned his attention to the view. "I had a special place, too. I used to go there when I was in trouble...or unhappy...or hurting. You get beaten up often enough by guys bigger than you or get thrown out by parents who don't want you playing with their kids or seeing their daughters, and you need a place to regroup. I had lots of buddies. But I never had anyone I trusted enough to take there."

The traces of buried bitterness and hurt told Lundy that his partner's childhood wasn't just the warm loving family La Fiamma had so far imparted and he tried to reconcile the diametric images. Aloud, he talked of some of the objects he'd found and what they told him about the Indians that had traded here.

Eventually the lengthening shadows caught Lundy's attention and he swung himself off the ledge. "C'mon, we'd better start for home before it gets dark."

La Fiamma took a farewell look around. "'...where life could be like you wanted it to be....'" he repeated wistfully, then fidgetted uncomfortably on his perch. "If I ever make it back to Chicago, Lundy, I'd like to show you that place. You'd like it, it has a little creek and everything."

Startled, Lundy glanced at the younger man, but La Fiamma wouldn't look at him. Preoccupied, La Fiamma hopped down, his breath catching as he accidently landed on his injured foot. Instinctively drawing back, he swayed momentarily out of balance and was caught and steadied by Lundy.

"Damn!" La Fiamma muttered. As Lundy's hands fell away, he nodded to his partner. "I'm okay. Just caught off guard." As soon as he started walking, he realized that sitting had been a mistake, for the anesthetizing numbness had now worn off.

Lundy let him limp to the edge of the clearing. "Are you ready to admit to being human and needing help?"

Though he ignored both the question and the man at his side, La Fiamma did come to a halt and stand still.

"We both know you've the grit to hobble all the way home," Lundy continued, "but you aggravate that foot enough, you won't be walking on it at all."

When La Fiamma still hesitated, Lundy's voice softened. "C'mon. It can't be that difficult to lean on me."

As soon as La Fiamma started to reach out, Lundy grabbed his arm and slid it over his shoulder. "'Bout time you got smart."

The hike home was awkward even though La Fiamma tried to use Lundy's support only to relieve the pressure on the injury and not to lean too heavily on the other man. It wasn't until a full five minutes after they began that Lundy heard the mumbled thanks.

It was dark before they arrived at the cabin. Lundy let La Fiamma find his own way to the couch while he went to check the medicine chest. He returned with two glasses of clear liquid instead.

"I need to keep a better watch on Toby. Medicine chest's damn near empty. We don't even have aspirin. Sorry, La Fiamma."

"'S'okay," he answered from his slumped position.

Lundy crossed in front of him and held out one glass. "Here, tequila should deaden it some."

La Fiamma looked over at him, then sat up, making room on the couch for Lundy to sit. He took the tequila with a nod and downed it in one swallow.

"You may as well lie down. I'm going to start dinner anyway." As Lundy left for the kitchen area, he called over his shoulder, "Sure you didn't plan this to get out of cooking detail?"

Thinking back to what they had purchased, La Fiamma harrumphed. "Don't think I could stand to look at hot dogs and beans."

"Seems to me Chicago's rather well-known for them."

"Kosher ones. Vienna brand. For the ball games. This doesn't look like Wrigley Field to me."

"So pretend."

The twisted covers impeded La Fiamma's legs as he rolled over to his other side. Gritting his teeth as his ankle protested, he was forced to admit this wasn't working. It was bad enough that the throbbing had begun as soon as he lay down and tried to sleep, but he couldn't find a position where his ribs didn't hurt.

Curling up with his arms wrapped around his middle didn't help either and just made his back ache more. If he tried lying supine, then he could feel the discomfort not only through his back, but his butt and thighs as well. He turned over again, knowing full well by now that one side was no better than the other, yet he was too uncomfortable to remain still.

That his muscles were stiffening up on him was no surprise, for he knew how the body reacted when overextended, but he hadn't taken into account that he'd feel tender from the fall as well.

And if it wasn't bad enough that he couldn't get comfortable, when he did manage to ignore the aches and the throbbing for a few minutes, the crickets outside caught his attention. It almost seemed like they were chirping in the same rhythm.

A low tap on the door ended the restless movements. *Damn!* La Fiamma thought, *I shoulda known I'd disturb him.* "Your house, Lundy," he called out, reaching to switch on the nearby lamp. "No need for ceremony."

Lundy opened the door and stood just inside of it, one fist around the neck of the tequila and other hand with fingers splayed inside the glasses. Before speaking, he eyed his partner, noting the tension lines he had expected to find.

"You gonna play Vulcan all night, La Fiamma? Or you want another drink to help you sleep?"

Shaking his head no, La Fiamma levered himself into a sitting position, making room for his partner.

"Look, Lundy, I'm sorry if I woke you," La Fiamma apologized, watching the other man place the glassware on the nightstand before seating himself on the edge of the bed. "I was just settling in."

Lundy snorted. "Your tossing and turning wouldn't let anyone sleep." He studied La Fiamma a moment, then added sympathetically, "Must bother you quite a bit."

"Just cuz I can't sleep doesn't..." he started off defensively, then let his voice trail off as he saw the look in the brown eyes. He stared at Lundy for a few seconds longer, then flushed. "Yeah. A bit."

Seeing Lundy about to comment, La Fiamma looked down and crumpled the bedding in his fist. "It's bad enough I hurt all over, but the damn racket those crickets make would keep anyone awake."

"The crickets?"

The amusement in Lundy's voice made La Fiamma redden. He cursed his rash tongue, especially since his rush to forestall sympathy made him say the first thing that crossed his mind. But embarrassment soon gave way to frustration that the deflection hadn't worked.

"Okay," La Fiamma spat, irritated. "I shoulda stayed off my feet. Foolish of me to go traipsing all over the woods just to see a decaying old trading post. Isn't that what you're here to say? Consider your told you so delivered and go back to bed." He shifted restlessly against the headboard and shaded his eyes with his arm.

"Figured if you couldn't sleep, talking might take your mind off it."

La Fiamma lowered his arm to look at Lundy. "Doesn't make sense to keep us both awake."

Lundy eyed his partner thoughtfully. "Maybe, but you've been tramping around in my past all day. Isn't it time for a little reciprocation?"

"I've shared my past with you."

Lundy shook his head at the too-quick protest. "Stories, La Fiamma. About the Mob and your connections. Sometimes about your uncle. More concerning your cases. Stories, not the truth about...Little Joey."

Aware that the words echoed his own, La Fiamma could do nothing but surrender to the inevitable. "What do you want to know?"

Rubbing his cheek, Lundy took the time to consider his next words. "You could start with why you only mention your uncle and aunt," he said, feeling his way carefully. "Or why a kid like you needed a hideaway."

"What do you think happened, anyone who looked at me cross-wise ended up in concrete?" La Fiamma joked, avoiding a direct answer.

Seeing that the tautness had eased a bit in the younger man, Lundy allowed the change in tack. "Something like that," he tossed back, with a confirming wink.

"You got us all wrong, Lundy," La Fiamma said with a flicker of a grin, shaking his head.

"Yeah, I know, you've already told me how your uncle taught you to fight your own battles, remember? Seems to me you do okay for yourself."

Compliments from Lundy were still rare enough to catch La Fiamma off-guard. After a moment, he harrumphed. "Yeah, now. When people take you on just to see how tough you are, you become what they expect."

"I know better than to believe you ran from fights," Lundy insisted. "So when--"

"What other wounds did I have to lick, is that what you're asking, Lundy?" His voice grew tense and he didn't continue.

Lundy didn't press him. When he saw La Fiamma shift around, trying for a more comfortable position, he reached over and poured out two shots of tequila. Without saying anything, he held out a glass to his partner.

Looking first at the extended hand, La Fiamma raised his eyes to meet Lundy's. Reading the adamant look, La Fiamma pressed his lips tightly together and took the proffered drink. A moment later he was grateful that sipping it gave him an excuse not to answer.

"Why don't you lie down and try to get some rest? I'll leave if you want."

La Fiamma shook his head. "Talking helps," he conceded, suddenly aware that, with Lundy there, he hadn't been paying attention to his discomfort. "It's just..."

It's just that I've spent much of my life trying to get people to see me as more than my background.

But this was his partner and he did want...

"You know, Lundy, you have your problems here between...like Mexicans and Texans. But it's the same up North. Maybe worse because no one acknowledges it's there. Chicago is made up of **neighborhoods.** As long as you stay in your own, everything's cool."

"But the neighborhoods come together in the schools," Lundy finished for him. "Yeah, I could see where there'd be trouble. Yet all the languages you know. You must've bounced through a few of them on your own."

"Sort of. Actually for me it was more like a no win situation. If I ran around with friends from my own neighborhood, I had my mother on my back. Unless their parentage was quite clean, that is. But then their parents could sometimes--Lundy, people who fight against their background can be the unkindest of all.

"Bumming around with kids from other streets got my old lady off my back. But I was Italian and all Dagos were suspect. Sometimes it didn't matter. Other times it'd gut you when you least expected it.

"Eventually, you learn to exploit the fear or give up. Or stick with others in similar situations. Only then you end up fighting their battles as well as your own.

"Hell, I probably looked like a pushover back then."

The off-hand remark caused Lundy to appraise the clear blue eyes and clean-cut features as he tried to reconstruct the dark-haired child from the man before him. He couldn't help but make judgments, but he kept them to himself.

"I take it your mother didn't want you to follow in Uncle Mikey's footsteps."

La Fiamma snickered. "That's an understatement. I wouldn't have put it past her to move us far away from the family. Had it been possible. Uncle Mikey was her favorite brother. Otherwise she might've even banned him from the house. Their fights were classic." His eyes softened as he remembered.

"She didn't do too good in keeping you away from him, did she? I doubt you stayed away from anyone you wanted to see." When La Fiamma looked at the wall and started to tap his fingers on imaginary scales, Lundy knew the guess was accurate. He grinned. "Getting you to listen to anybody is a major accomplishment."

The tapping stopped as the dark head jerked around. "Hey, I loved my mother. I just didn't always see things her way. My uncle got a lot of respect. And where he didn't, well, people kept their mouths shut. When you're a kid coming from where I was, that carries a lot of weight."

"Think what that respect was built on."

"Fear looks pretty good when you spend half your childhood fighting. Anyway, no kid sees what's going on underneath. 'Til he's old enough to figure it out for himself."

"Yeah, I know, all he sees is the uncle who loves him and takes him to ball games. What about your father? What was his attitude in all this?"

La Fiamma shrugged. "Too young when he was killed. Don't even remember him. I think that deep down my mother blamed the family for his death, but she'd never come out and say so..." His voice trailed off into silence, leaving him depressed.

"Your father in the Mob...Outfit, too?" Lundy interjected quickly, to regain the younger man's attention.

"More or less on the periphery. But it didn't matter. It didn't stop him from being gunned down. For a long time I used to think...

"You may have fought with your father, Lundy, but at least he was real. Not just a composite of someone's old memories."

"Yeah," he answered noncommitally, the comment leading his thoughts off onto painful tracks. For a few minutes there was silence between them.

"Funny thing was...she fought me being a cop as well. How does that grab you, Levon? For all her bitching

about Uncle Mikey, she didn't want me on the other side either." He reached up to toss the hair out of his eyes.

"So you went to law school to please her," Lundy guessed.

Startled, La Fiamma halted in mid-motion, then met his partner's eyes. "Yeah," he answered, shrugging. "But I quit when she...hey, I coulda made the grade, Lundy. If I'da wanted to stay," he interjected, remembering the Texan's taunt from the first days together.

"I know." When La Fiamma looked perplexed, he elaborated. "I checked."

Frowning, La Fiamma looked away. "Someone always does. Sometimes I think the whole world's just waiting for me to turn dirty."

"Not us."

La Fiamma faced Lundy again and stared, "No, I guess not."

Lundy stiffened and would have stood up, except that La Fiamma stayed him with a hand on his arm. After a moment, the awkwardness dissolved into a shy smile. "Hey, not you, Levon. No matter what goes down, that's one certainty I'm learning to count on. You don't know how important that is to me."

The brown eyes warmed immediately. "I might. More than you think." he added softly. "Wish you'd remember...you no longer have to prove anything."

The more-familiar sideways twitch reappeared. "Yeah, well, maybe after today, I can."

They continued to talk quietly until La Fiamma caught Lundy trying to disguise a yawn. Looking more closely, he noted the taut lines of exhaustion that lined the blonde's rugged features. It was quite apparent that Lundy could barely keep his eyes open. To see his partner fight to stay awake both amused and moved the dark-haired detective.

"Hey, cowboy, why don't you go off to bed? I'll be all right." He took the empty glass from Lundy's hand and stacking it with his, placed them both on the side table. "I might even be able to sleep now."

Lundy stood and stretched. Still, he hesitated. La Fiamma looked relaxed enough, even tired, but....

"Are you sure?"

La Fiamma nodded. "Yeah. Look, it's not like I'm in real pain. But tell you what. If I have any problems, I'll use your other remedy." He gestured toward the nightstand. "Deal?"

Lundy nodded, but didn't move. With an exasperated shake of the head, La Fiamma slid down under the covers, then turned to give Lundy a sideways grin. "You can be the one to turn out the light, Lundy, if it makes you feel better."

"Watch it," Lundy warned, returning the twitch. Reaching toward the lamp, he paused to give La Fiamma a long measured look. For several beats the younger man met the gaze steady on, then knit his brows together. The action roused Lundy from his reverie and he finally flipped the switch. It left him with barely enough moonlight to see his way.

Levering himself onto one elbow, La Fiamma watched the silhouette amble across the room, aware that the usual Texan swagger had been robbed of its spring and not happy to have added to that exhaustion. The drawn features lingered on his mind and he caught himself thinking how little he liked to see Lundy that way.

When Lundy reached the door, he paused and turned back. Caught off-guard, La Fiamma hurriedly glanced to the side, grateful for the enveloping darkness.

"Even the crickets are asleep now. Pleasant dreams, Chicago."

"Get outta here, Lundy."

Lundy entered the cabin to find the transplanted Chicagoan at the stove, preparing breakfast. "Hold on, La Fiamma, and I'll get that." Tossing on the counter the cloth he'd used to wipe his hands, he headed first to the sink.

"'SOkay, Lundy. I've got everything under control."

"Yeah, everything but you. You can't be left alone for a minute. Can't you give that foot of yours a rest? Let it heal?"

Putting down the wooden spatula, La Fiamma stepped over to the refrigerator and reached inside. "Let's not go back to the invalid treatment. Sure it's a bit annoying, but nothing I can't handle. You aren't getting the message."

"No," Lundy answered back, watching the Levi-decked detective knee the door shut. "You aren't getting the message. Stay off your feet or we go back to Houston right now."

As he took the eggs from the other man's hands, he saw La Fiamma bristle at the words. "Look, you'll be running around enough when we get back to work," he placated. "You ought to take advantage of the Lord's day of rest. Especially when someone else's volunteering to do the work."

The tone was as calming as intended. For a moment, La Fiamma watched the Texan work at the stove, then said, "Yeah, well, I'm not used to the Florence Nightingale routine."

The answering snort took him by surprise.

"If I play the healing angel, it won't be for the likes of you. I'm just thinking about facing the Lieutenant tomorrow. Joanne'll kill me if one of her best cops is out of commission."

In the process of reaching for the warming coffee pot, La Fiamma was brought up short. Pleased, he stood still and let Lundy take the few steps necessary to get the mugs.

"Next you'll be telling me you care about me," La Fiamma murmured under his breath, as they were handed to him.

"Could happen," Lundy remarked as he turned his attention back to the stove. But the silence was so drawn out that he ended up meeting his partner's eyes.

"Now that might be worth sticking around for," La Fiamma offered after a beat, his expression mirroring his thoughts.

Turning back to the stove, Lundy's lips twitched in response. "Might. You never know. Anyone can lose his head."

His attention was caught, though, by a scraping against the floor as La Fiamma hauled over a chair, swung it around, and with obvious flourish straddled it. The deliberate gaze that followed was almost challenging, so with a shake of the head, he turned back to his work, not quite hiding the smile that tugged at his face.

Over breakfast came the expected question.

"Fishing?" La Fiamma repeated incredulously. "Is that how you expect to keep me off my feet today?"

"You can sit in a boat, can't you?" Lundy tossed back, knowing that he didn't have the energy to put up with fidgetting all day. "You don't even hafta do much, if it's still bothering you."

"I'm okay. And if you had a stereo in this blast from the past, you wouldn't have to worry about me." The comment earned a friendly snicker.

"It isn't done that way out here. You know that."

La Fiamma groaned. "Yeah, I know better. Alright, let's go play in the Great Outdoors."

The boat hitched to the back of the Jimmy made La Fiamma whistle. Though far from new, it was obvious that the Bass Tracker wasn't cheap. It had a wrap-around console with a rally wheel and smoked windshield. The contoured seats were covered with plush black leather. Bookending the pair of side-by-side drivers were two raised ones that La Fiamma had never seen before on a power boat.

"You win this in the lottery, Lundy? This boat's worth a good piece of change," La Fiamma marvelled, walking over to the trailer to get a better look.

"A 17 foot hull in this bass boat and the best trolling motor in the business," Lundy proudly explained, heading for the Jimmy. "Come on, get in. Everything's loaded up."

"You Texans take fishing pretty serious, don't you?" La Fiamma called out as he ran his hand across the finish.

Pausing with the door wide open, Lundy glanced back and watched his partner walk to the other side of the truck. "We gave up rowboats years ago," he quipped before hopping inside.

They drove down to a decrepit wooden dock on the lake and positioned the trailer so the boat was at the

water's edge. Lundy jumped into the Pro 17 and stood by the driver's seat, ready to start the engine.

"Winch her out," he called and watched as La Fiamma crossed to the front of the boat.

Fumbling a bit with the mechanism, La Fiamma eventually figured out how it worked and cranked it until the bow was high enough up to release. The boat slid easily into the water and La Fiamma walked over to push the bow out towards the lake. That done, he leaped onto the rear platform before the momentum carried her too far out. Balancing a hand momentarily on the nearby raised seat, he stepped down into the well and eased himself into the other interior seat.

By that time Lundy had the motor started and running smoothly. Heading out slowly, he noted the lack of attention at his side. His eyes twinkled as he pushed the throttle full out and he took his partner for a short mad ride of the lake before finding a quiet, undisturbed place to cut the power.

Once he shut down the stern motor, Lundy jerked his head toward the rear fishing seat. "You take that catbird. I'll need to keep an eye on the trolling motor," he told La Fiamma. With that he scrambled up front to release the steel bar and throw it over the bow. As soon as he had it positioned and running, he opened the compartment that housed his tacklebox.

Placing it on the rear platform, he opened it with pride, hinging out the trays to display the various hooks, plastic worms, and lures. As he turned to the compartment that held the rods, he said, "People argue over which color is best so take whatever suits you."

Intent on extracting the fishing gear, Lundy didn't see the expression on the other man's face as he stared at the rows of brightly colored items. "Here, this should do you." Lundy handed over the pole without looking up.

It wasn't until after long moments of contemplating all the different colors of plastic worms, finally making his selection, and attaching it to the end of his hook that Lundy looked over to see what his guest had chosen.

The brightly colored lure surprised him. "We're fishing for bass, La Fiamma."

"Yeah. So?"

There's no law that says you have to use plastic worms, Lundy reasoned. *It's a bit weird to use that lure, but...hell, people keep touting those newfangled Lazer Tails and I've been meaning to try one.*

He shrugged. "Nothing," he said aloud, and moved up to sit in the bow catbird. "Which side of the boat do you want?" He waited until La Fiamma sat in the other seat, then swivelled his to the opposite side.

Unaware of the attentive eyes on him, Lundy cast out with a lazy flick of the arm, leaned back in his seat and settled the brim of his hat to give himself some shade.

When Lundy made no move to retrieve his line, the ex-Chicagoan turned his attention to his own rod with its short unretracted end. *There must be a safety release somewhere here,* he thought as he looked more closely at the reel. Unfortunately, a couple of buttons stared back at him as he realized that one of them had to be holding the mechanism to the rod.

Don't want to hit that one, he told himself. *You'd look pretty silly if the reel dropped off on you.* He glanced over to see if his partner would cast again, but Lundy seemed satisfied with just jerking the rod periodically.

Pressing his lips together, La Fiamma glared at the back facing him. An idea hit him and he glanced from the relaxed figure to the fishing pole and back again. Realizing that Lundy was paying him no mind, La Fiamma just dropped his line over the side of the boat.

Another glance at Lundy told him that the other man hadn't seen him, so he reconciled himself to sitting there, holding his pole while he tried to reason out the buttons on the reel.

He was soon bored. It was uncomfortable holding his arm extended to keep the pole lowered enough to dangle the line in the water, but he was damned if he was going to ask for instruction, especially when the reel didn't look complicated. The Texan still hadn't cast again, seemingly content to lounge there, communing with nature, and had made no conversation except to ask for a longneck.

Without looking over, Lundy had indicated that the cold compartment was by the stern seat and La Fiamma was relieved that he'd been able to toss over the beer without Lundy being any the wiser. But it didn't cure his boredom.

Tempted to ask if there was a radio in this fancy rowboat, La Fiamma decided he didn't need another snide lesson on Texan customs. He was just about to start whistling when he heard the other line being reeled in.

This time he watched more closely. The Texan moved his arm back a bit and as he lazily flicked it forward, La Fiamma saw him moving his thumb. With a sense of triumph, the dark-haired detective knew he was on the right track, even if he couldn't yet determine which one was the release. Watching the worm skip across the surface of the water was no help so he stared down at his own, finally resigning himself to waiting again.

On the third cast, he figured out what Lundy had done and now was eager to try it, not realizing that he also had to know **when** to release it. Drawing his arm full back, he brought his hand over his shoulder and thumbed the release on the forward motion as he had seen Lundy do. Although not released at the right time, the momentum carried the line out and La Fiamma was exhiliarated when it hit the water fully extended.

Delighted that he now had the hang of it, he began casting out and reeling in in quick succession.

Content to let his thoughts meander while his body soaked up the sun, Lundy was too relaxed to worry about what his companion was up to. Eventually a sensation of a lot of activity penetrated his self-induced cocoon and he glanced over to the source. *What the hell is he doing?* he wondered as he sat up straight in his seat.

"Working awfully hard at that," he commented as he lazily jerked his fishing pole.

The off-hand remark stopped La Fiamma and he slowed down. He returned to surreptitiously watching the Texan's moves. This time when Lundy cast out, La Fiamma noticed how close he held his arm to his body and the sideways motion. Attempting to mimick his partner, he didn't realize that he had his arm too far back, nor did he see what the hook had captured.

Following through in one motion, he hit the release and stared in horror as the line spun its way out.

Lundy felt the hat tugged off his head and leapt to his feet as it flew away from him. He swung around just in time to see it plop in the water.

For a moment they both stared at it floating.

"Dammit, boy, you did that on purpose!" Lundy exploded, as he stalked over. "What is it 'bout my hat that you can't leave it be? You keep it up..."

The outburst deflated as he came up beside the other man and noticed the startled expression. As he watched La Fiamma continue to gape at the hat, he realized that it had indeed been an accident.

"Well, reel it in already," he said when he'd calmed down enough to speak normally. "Before it gets soaked."

That immediately brought La Fiamma out of his stupor and he cranked the wheel as fast as he could.

"Dammit, do that more smoothly, or you'll break that as well," Lundy muttered as he espied the jerky movements. He reached for the rod but by that time La Fiamma had the line retracted. Putting the pole between his legs, he started to unhook the hat, but stopped when Lundy took over and undid it. He watched in silence as Lundy beat the hat against his leg and the water drops shimmered as they showered down.

The soak lines made Lundy's temper flare again. "Dammit, boy, you don't know what the hell you're doing, do you?" he muttered as he set the hat down to dry. "First the panfish lure. Then you're castin' and reelin' a mile a minute. Now this--

"Don't tell me! You can't fish in Lake Michigan. Whassamatter--too many dead bodies kill off the stock?"

At first La Fiamma remained quiet, until he realized Lundy expected an answer. "Hey, people trail rods off the piers every summer," he offered contritely. "Not that there's much worth catching. To be serious requires a boat. Besides, most people go north."

"Well then, what happened to you? Must've been <u>real</u> welcome on those piers."

"Nobody complains if you're fishing for alewives." Seeing that Lundy didn't comprehend his joke, he teethed his lower lip and explained. "They wash up dead on the beach." He tried to let it go at that, but the Texan continued to glare at him.

"I didn't exactly grow up within jogging distance of the lake, Lundy."

The subdued tone penetrated and drowned the fire with the same force that their verbal battles usually fueled it. For a moment, Lundy could only look at him, as he suddenly understood what La Fiamma had been loathe to reveal.

"In other words, your uncle was always too busy and you had no one else to take you," Lundy sympathized. He moved over and took the rod from the unresisting hands. "No problem. It never takes you long to catch on."

"Must've talked too much last night," La Fiamma murmured, feeling suddenly very vulnerable and too embarrassed to look up.

That the young man before him had barriers which were in their way just as strong as his own was something that Lundy had long recognized. It was one of the bonds that had drawn him in the days when the new arrival's personality was more irritant than anything else. Now he was struck with the speed at which control of any situation could turn fragile.

"Well," Lundy drawled deliberately and kindly. "Does makes one wonder how you ended up...on this side of the law, Wild Bill."

The familiar taunt about his guns made La Fiamma look up and had the easing effect Lundy was hoping for.

The gleam in the dark eyes brought an answering modest smile. Then La Fiamma's expression turned serious. "Maybe some day I'll tell you," he offered hesitantly.

Lundy slapped the rod back into his hand. "Okay, Jimmy Rogers, let's get you set up for bass." He bent down and pulled a bright yellow squiggle from the tackle box. "First off, you don't use a lure," he said as he attached the plastic worm to the hook.

"Why not?"

"Bass stay down in the reeds. You want the bait to settle in the water." He moved a few feet back to give La Fiamma room to manuever. "Now casting. It's a learned skill. Don't cast like a banty rooster with wet tail feathers."

At the blank look, Lundy explained further. "Keep your elbows in. It's your arm that goes out." Flicking his arm out, he mimed the proper technique. "Easy does it."

"Like this, huh?" La Fiamma asked as he mimicked the demonstration.

Lundy nodded. "Quick learner. Now hit the release when you're about halfway forward so your momentum's still carrying you."

La Fiamma did as instructed and smiled when it worked. A moment later he started to reel in the line.

"No. Let it sit out there. Bass are attracted to movement. Flick your wrist occasionally and take up a little line."

Doing as he was told, La Fiamma was surprised at how easy it seemed. The next thing he knew, there was tension on the line and the rod jerked. Suddenly the line was unreeling at an incredible rate. As the line sped away, it occurred to him there actually was something alive on the other end.

"Now what do I do?" His hand tightened around the handle as the sudden jerks and lurches made him fear for his grip.

"Reel it in," Lundy shouted out. Caught up in the excitement, he moved closer, ready to give assistance.

Cranking the wheel against a bobbing, yanking, pulling pressure proved harder than La Fiamma imagined. He couldn't seem to hold the rod steady enough to get the reel to move properly. His windups were as jerky as the movements of his prey. More than once his fingers slipped and he hit them against the metallic surface.

It occurred to him he might lose this battle and in frustration, he began pulling harder.

"Ease off or he'll keep on going down," Lundy cautioned. "You want him to come up to throw the hook. Not saw through the line." He watched as La Fiamma tried to comply. "Ease off a bit more. Let him come to you, not fight you."

If he could've spared the breath, La Fiamma would have yelled what the hell did Lundy think it was doing. Instead he did as he was told. Feeling clumsier than he ever had in his life, he finally got the line retracted. Numbed, he watched the fish wiggle and flop around.

"It's a keeper," Lundy said as he reached over for the line, intending to help remove the prize. At the same

time, the bass jerked and it swung away from him. As it circled nearer to him, La Fiamma lunged at the fish.

"No!" Lundy yelled as he saw La Fiamma grab at the fins. But he was too late.

The sharp edges surprised La Fiamma and he immediately let go, gaping at the continued wiggling and flopping around. Suddenly the hook sprang free and the bass dropped back into the water.

To La Fiamma's ears, the plop sounded like a gunshot. Then all was quiet as he watched the dissipating ripples.

"That's not the way you do it, La Fiamma. Did you cut your hand?" Moving a step closer, he started to reach out, but stopped when the other man shook his head.

Shrugging, La Fiamma stared out at the calm water.

"You grab 'em by slipping two fingers under the gills. That forces the mouth open. Then you wrangle the hook out."

"Yeah, well, at least I caught something," La Fiamma said, frustration making his choice of words careless.

Miffed, Lundy went back to his own seat. Perplexed, La Fiamma watched him go. Even the called out epitaph of thanks, partner only brought a shrug.

After another long look at the silent Texan, La Fiamma cast off as he'd been taught, not understanding why he should suddenly feel so down.

Time passed slowly as they both fished in their own little worlds. Until once again it was La Fiamma who got the nibble. The excited yell brought Lundy out of his seat, despite his intentions. But this time La Fiamma needed very little help to bring it in.

La Fiamma watched as Lundy took the bass from him, bent down, and dropped it into the aerated live well. "Uh, you're a great teacher."

"Yeah, well, don't get too cocky on beginner's luck." He grabbed a handful of the yellow worms and straightened to face his partner. The look in the blue eyes made him force a smile. "Hey, you're doing okay," he said as he tossed him some bait. "We've got plenty of time."

Even Lundy's mood couldn't depress La Fiamma after the next catch. He was having a good time and he felt like a kid again. Eager to share his enthusiasm, he began chatting away, not paying attention to how one-sided the conversation was.

After the novice fisherman had caught a couple more bass, Lundy had enough of the endless chatter from the rear seat.

"For god's sake, shut up," he hissed between his teeth. "You're scaring away the fish."

"Not scaring my fish," La Fiamma teased, too perky to be deflated. "My fishies like my lines."

"It's not you, boy," Lundy bristled, not reacting well to his partner's sense of humor. "Some days bass run that way...on one side of a boat and not the other."

"Oh." Though he was a bit confused at Lundy's testiness, it was enough to dampen his spirits. "Perhaps we should switch sides, huh? You know, like at half time on the basketball court."

"It's not that big a deal."

It suddenly occurred to La Fiamma that it was and for the first time in his life, he didn't want to compete, unwittingly or otherwise. "C'mon, Levon," he said softly, "don't be so stubborn. We could share the same side, couldn't we?"

Lundy looked over and studied him. "Maybe. If it'll keep you quiet...."

"Maybe it'll be easier if you don't have your back to me. I don't like it." He looked out over the water and swallowed hard. "Makes me feel like I'm out here...alone," he added softly.

"You're not alone," Lundy fired back and began reeling in his line. "You should know that by now." Then he swivelled his catbird chair to the other side of the boat and cast again. "Besides," he drawled, giving La Fiamma a slow grin, "leaving you alone is a waste of time."

Returning the expression, La Fiamma reached over and picked up the now-dried, forgotten Stetson. "Yeah, well, maybe," he rambled as he tried on the hat. "No one said I had to make it easy." Pausing, he adjusted the brim until it felt more comfortable on his head. "If

you must, think of it this way. You fish this side and I can see better. Pick up more pointers."

"You're doing okay. You don't need any more help."

"Oh, yes...I do."

For a long moment Lundy just met his eyes without revealing anything. Until La Fiamma began to fidget and lowered the brim to shade his face.

"Give me my hat," he said finally, trying to feign annoyance. "Before you fall overboard and get it soaked again."

Sighing, La Fiamma took it off and tossed it over. "Ever the confidence in me, huh. Here. Wouldn't want you to lose it."

"Actually...it'll float. It was you who might not."

Whatever La Fiamma might have answered was lost in the jerk on Lundy's line. The Texan had barely time to jam the Stetson on his head before he had a feisty fight on his hands. Still, he soon had it reeled in.

"It shore is a big 'un," La Fiamma mimicked joyfully, taking pride in his companion's good fortune.

"Yep, 8 or 9 pounder," Lundy jovially returned, his eyes sparkling. "Put her on ice, partner," he said as he tossed over the fish.

As the rest of the afternoon passed in companionable silence, La Fiamma spent time looking at the lake, fixing it in his mind. He even noticed that the color of scum was different on this lake from what he was used to back in Chicago. About to share this observation with his partner, he remembered his promise to Lundy and kept quiet instead.

"We'd better think about going home," Lundy reluctantly observed, glancing first at the position of the sun and then over to his partner. The figure leaning back in the seat with his legs outstretched looked ever so much like he belonged.

We'll make a Texan out of you yet, Lundy grinned to himself, knowing better than to voice the thought aloud.

Roused from considering that this might not be a bad sport to take up, La Fiamma sat up straight and nodded. As he began reeling in his line, he realized he wasn't anxious for the day to end.

Handing his gear to La Fiamma to stow away, Lundy stopped the trolling motor, pulled it out of the water, and latched it into its holder. Then he moved over to start the main engine.

It coughed, sputtered, and died.

Lundy switched to the auxiliary tank, swearing when it did the same.

"Forget to fill it?" La Fiamma sweetly asked, easing himself into the other seat.

"We were only gonna be out a couple of hours," Lundy said, shrugging. He pushed himself out of the seat and crawled over to the stern to look at the motor.

"Oh shit," he swore as he spied the purple slick floating behind the boat. When La Fiamma joined him, he pointed to it. "Must've broken a gas line."

"Oh," La Fiamma said in an apologetic voice. "I've been wondering what that purple slime was."

"And you didn't think to bother mentioning it?"

Lundy looked fit to kill him, so La Fiamma knelt down to study the oil slick to escape his gaze. "I figured it was something indigenous to Texas. You're always priding yourselves on being different. Whoever saw gas that color anyway?"

Certainly not someone who didn't grow up around boats, Lundy silently admitted in fairness. The other man's posture made Lundy feel guilty. *Besides, he's got a better excuse than you do,* he reminded himself.

"Yeah, well, it's not your fault the auxil's dry," Lundy apologized kindly. "C'mon," he added as La Fiamma met his eyes, "we're gonna have to row back."

"Row?" La Fiamma questioned as he watched Lundy get out the collapsible oars. "This boat ain't light, Lundy."

"Unless you've got a better way to get back." Lundy put the pieces together and tossed one over.

Deftly catching it, La Fiamma watched Lundy make his way back to the driver's seat before looking at the object in his hand. "You sure know how to keep me off my feet," he muttered, then shut up as he caught the Texan's expression.

Sitting side by side, they established a rhythm and then worked silently as the difficulty of their task hit home. By the time they reached the cabin, cleaned the fish, stowed the gear, and took care of whatever couldn't wait for a return trip the next weekend, it was far past the time they should have started the drive home.

Despite the long drive ahead, Lundy remembered his intention to stop at the general store to get La Fiamma started on aspirin as soon as possible. Now that a sore back and aching muscles might also add to his partner's physical discomfort, he was even more adamant that they be taken.

One look at Lundy's expression stifled La Fiamma's automatic protest and he meekly accepted the proffered pills. When his 'you should take some too' comment fell on deaf ears, he decided he was too tired and sore to argue and he leaned back, turning to stare out the window into the blackness beyond.

Neither was in the mood to chat, so as the Jimmy sped along the highway, the silence inside matched the darkness without. Soon La Fiamma was drifting in and out of consciousness, even though he tried to remain alert in case Lundy should need him.

For his part, Lundy was pleased to see his partner dozing. When the arm came sliding down into the area between the seats to hang loosely there, he reached over and gently set it back on the sleeping man's thigh, patting it twice as if to order it to stay put.

For a moment longer he held on, as he thought warmly about the past couple of days and how ironic it was to be driving away as fast as he could from a place he was not yet ready to leave. Then he concentrated on making the ride as smooth as possible.

The truck easing to a stop brought La Fiamma to consciousness, as he instinctively knew he was home. He came awake just in time to see Lundy rest his head against the fists clutching the wheel.

Almost instantly, Lundy jerked his head up, afraid his weakness would be seen. Glancing sideways, he noted the half-opened eyes focusing on him and almost swore. "Your castle, sleeping beauty," he said tightly, gesturing to the appropriate structure.

"You better come in for some coffee." When he saw Lundy shake his head, he started to protest. "Levon--"

"I just want to get home," Lundy cut in. "And I'm too tired to sit here arguing. So move your butt."

But La Fiamma made no attempt to leave. "You sure you're okay?" he asked after a long pause. "About the Colt, your grandfa--"

"Over and done with," Lundy cut in, surprised that La Fiamma should be bringing it up again. With something more important on his mind, he was uninterested in going over what was settled in the cabin. "Let it rest."

When the other man said nothing, it occurred to him that his words may have been more brusque than intended. Taking off his hat, he ran his fingers through his hair while he pondered what he wanted to say.

"Look, that's all behind us now. Buried at the cabin. Let's leave it there, okay? But...you can have coffee ready for me in the morning."

"What'cha mean?" As he straightened in the seat, La Fiamma rolled his shoulders to ease the tension and then reached up to push the hair from his eyes.

"I'll pick you up on the way in."

"Then kill the engine and camp out at my place instead. I'll even make you breakfast."

When the Texan shook his head no again, La Fiamma banged his fist against the inside of the door. "You're a damn stubborn mule, Lundy," he complained, frustrated. "These last few days you've been through a lot. You don't need to be driving back and forth when you need sleep even more than I do. So if you won't stay the night here, I'll drive myself in. 'Not a cripple, you know."

Lundy glanced out of his window and scratched his cheek before answering. "You might miss the station and hit the bus depot."

The comment startled La Fiamma and he turned to meet Lundy's eyes. In the diffuse street-lighting, he could just barely see the hesitant question in them. Frustration gave way to warmth as the weekend seemed to panorama out in front of him. Suddenly he didn't feel so tired.

"Can't do that, can I? Someone has to help you get your boat fixed...next weekend," he said, grinning warmly.

The devastating smile brought a lurch to Lundy's guts and was infectious. The response encouraged La Fiamma even further. "Besides," he said softly, "don't need to find my way there any more, do I?"

Though he had phrased it as a rhetorical question, La Fiamma sobered up as he waited for a reply. He didn't even realize how important an answer was until Lundy's smile widened. To La Fiamma, it seemed to glow, lighting up the Texas night.

"Good," Lundy nodded. "Too messy to hafta break your legs."

INTERMISSION

Break time. Close the zine, put some classical music on the stereo, the lights out, Then lie back on the sofa, close your eyes and let yourself fantasize your favorite pairing.... Drift into an adventure, a DWP, or just some silly little dialogue.

(Just remember to write it down later and submit it — *never let it be said that I missed an opportunity to drum up submissions*)

NO NEED TO BREAK A LEG

the rest of the story

By *Calico*

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"Good," Lundy nodded. "Too messy to hafta break your legs."

Both the daftness of the comment and its meaning hit La Fiamma at the same time and he didn't know whether to laugh or what. "I'd be a pain in the ass if you

did," he answered back, unwilling to let on how good he suddenly felt.
"You already are...if you don't get out of here.

Levon..." His voice trailed off as his eyes slid to the ignition key, which Lundy had made no attempt to turn off. "Okay, cowboy. You win. In the morning."

With the last words said, he palmed the door handle and got out, stumbling as his feet hit the ground. Grabbing onto the door prevented him from falling and he leaned against it momentarily to regain his balance.

"That's a pretty poor fake, La Fiamma," Lundy responded as he watched the show. "Okay, I'm coming."

La Fiamma smiled as Lundy turned off the engine. Shutting the truck door behind him, he leaned against it, waiting for the Texan to come around. When he did, Lundy shook his head. "Better stick to being a cop, La Fiamma. At least there your talent's worth paying for."

"What'cha mean? It oughta be Oscar material. Got'cha out here, didn't it?"

"You'd better lead the way, before I take it to mean you need help...walking," Lundy answered slyly.

Needing no further encouragement to start off towards his building, La Fiamma still hung back enough to let himself be walked to the door, just in case the Texan should have second thoughts about coming in.

Once inside, La Fiamma flipped on the lights and headed directly to the kitchen. "Which will it be, Levon," he called over his shoulder, "coffee or a bedtime drink?"

The question drew Lundy's attention to the couch and he glared at it with distaste. He had only slept on it once, but he remembered how uncomfortable it was. It was after Callie Barton had thrown his partner so badly. Legs had taken La Fiamma off to assuage his bruised ego and he had decided to make an early night of it for once. Indeed, he had been sleeping peacefully in his own bed when...

The phone rang and he automatically glanced at the clock as he felt for the handset. "Yeah?"

"Levon, it's Carol."

The name brought him fully awake. "Carol? What's wrong? Where's La Fiamma?" Throwing back the covers, he swung his legs off the bed and sat upright.

"Home, I guess. At least that's where he said he was going."

Turning on the bedside lamp, he glanced more closely at the clock, this time paying more attention to what it said. "I don't understand. A bit early, isn't it? You two were together, right? And..."

"Yeah and having a great time. You know how down he was when we started off. But he perked up soon after. Surprised me that he was such fun. There's a whole 'nuther side to he-man we've never seen. Then he took me home...and...it was...like a light switched off."

"He wouldn't stay."

"Carol, I don't think--"

"Shut up and listen, Levon. I wouldn't be calling if it just a case of lack of interest or not wanting to get involved. He's your partner and you know how he was hurting. We all get taken in at times--played for a fool. But that little socialite made him feel pretty used...."

In the pause that followed, Lundy said nothing. He didn't need her to remind him how down La Fiamma had been or how hurt. In the time they had been partnered, he had never seen a woman get to La Fiamma like Callie had done and he'd been very pleased when Carol had interceded.

Even so, Lundy thought, he didn't leap at the chance as he normally would've done. Instead, he was looking back to me as if he needed permission...or a kick to get started.

"I think he was feeling that if he stayed over--Levon, I don't really have to spell it out, do I?"

"No, I get the picture. But it's midnight, Carol. What do you want me to do about it?" To his surprise, he got no immediate answer. But then he really didn't need one, as he was already zipping up his jeans.

"He's your partner, Levon. I thought you'd want to know."

"Yeah. I do. I'll take care of it. And Carol...thanks," he said as he reached for his shirt. Trying to shoulder his way into the garment while balancing the handset

almost made him drop the phone, but he managed to catch it before it slipped far.

"Just take care of it, Levon."

"Don't worry. I'm on my way. But he won't be pleased to see me."

Understatement was the word that leaped to his mind when he faced the bare-chested figure in the doorway. The scowl that greeted him reminded him of the last time La Fiamma had opened the door for him half-undressed. The irony of the words he had spoken then hit home.

Except now, the look that greeted him was far darker....

"I mighta known she'd go running to you. Whassamatter, haven't you anything better to do than interfere in my life?"

"Yeah. Sleep for one thing. So I don't 'preciate standin' in your doorway," Lundy threw back, bristling at the bite in the other man's tone. Then he softened his stance with a nod that asked for admittance.

"By all means, come in," La Fiamma answered, opening the door wider as he bowed away from it. "Silly of me to think it too late for open house."

Once inside, Lundy's attention was caught by the half-empty wine bottle on the cocktail table. Then he nodded toward the glass in La Fiamma's hand. "Don't look to me like you were in bed. You sleep in your street clothes?"

"Maybe." Deliberately ignoring the Texan, La Fiamma grabbed the neck of the bottle and turned away. When he reached the kitchen, he poured himself another drink, then glanced at his intruder and went to a cabinet for another glass.

"Seems like it isn't my house you'all think's wide open," he muttered as if to himself. "Maybe you shoulda brought the whole damn unit with you. Then you'all could poke around in my life together. What's the sudden interest anyway?"

Instead of answering, Lundy stretched out on the couch, putting his feet up on the cocktail table with all the appearance of a man resigned to a lengthy visit. "You can snipe at me all night, La Fiamma, but we're going to talk about what's bothering you."

"What's there to talk about? What the hell did she tell you?" Pouring out the second drink gave La Fiamma an excuse not to look at Lundy.

Then he returned to the outer room to hover defiantly over his guest. "I came home to get some sleep."

When that didn't seem to faze the Texan, he added, "Maybe I decided I didn't like her all that much. Did you stop to consider that, huh?"

"Yeah," Lundy nodded. "For about two seconds."

Noting that La Fiamma didn't snap back with another glib remark, Lundy used the ensuing silence to consider the tension in the other man. As he watched, the defensive anger seemed to melt into...

"This okay? Or there's beer in the fridge." The subdued question interrupted his thoughts.

Suddenly aware he was no longer alone in the room, Lundy let the memory go, returning his attention to the present and his partner, who was once again standing next to him, holding filled tumblers in each hand.

La Fiamma, however, was staring at the couch. "I don't believe I ever thanked you for staying that night," he said in a quiet voice.

For a moment, all Lundy could think of was how transparent his thoughts must be, but the silence went unnoticed as he recovered quickly from the split-second discomfort.

"Yeah, you did. Right after you threw the bedding at me." He grinned at La Fiamma as his words recounted the incident.

La Fiamma met the boisterous expression with one of his own as he too recalled the scene. Unable to get rid of the unwanted presence, he had grudgingly punched Lundy in the gut with the necessary bedsheets, telling him that if he was insisting on staying, he could damn well make up the couch himself.

Letting the images roll forth in his mind, La Fiamma saw himself stop halfway up the stairs...and heard himself tell Lundy what his being there meant.

As the tableau froze in his mind, he realized what he had learned about having someone present who cared...someone to talk through your feelings...or just to lend a presence so you knew you weren't alone--that there was indeed someone there for you.

His expression sobered as he continued to reflect and he began to look searchingly at his companion.

The expressive gaze made Lundy nervously avert his own and he turned his attention back to the piece of furniture in question. "No offense, La Fiamma," he said to break the silence, "but your couch is too uncomfortable. I don't think I could stand sleeping there again."

"Then bunk down on the bed upstairs. It's big enough," La Fiamma said, deliberately pushing the drink into Lundy's hand as he spoke, hoping it would divert attention from his words.

The ensuing silence made him meet the brown eyes. "Well, you said it yourself," he began awkwardly, "when you're late to bed talking and you have to rise with the dawn, it doesn't matter who's sharing the other half in the hours in between." He ended his words with a shrug, wondering if he sounded as ill-at-ease as he felt.

Lundy continued to study him until La Fiamma was almost ready to retract his impetuous offer.

"What's in this?" Lundy asked, holding up the glass.

"Old family recipe," La Fiamma answered, relaxing. "Full of secrets that Sicilians only pass on to each other. Better for you than alcohol anyway. Drink up so we can go to bed."

"Careful with your offers, boy."

"You should be so lucky," LaFiamma harrumphed, grateful for the more familiar ground the teasing offered. "Just make sure you don't snore or you'll be out sleeping with the cows...wherever they are." He returned to the kitchen, turned out the light, and began to climb the winding staircase, leaving Lundy to follow when he wished.

❁

It wasn't long before Lundy entered the loft, but by then La Fiamma was dressed only in black silk bottoms, the dark sheen contrasting strongly with the bare skin. Laid out neatly on the bed were a matching pair of deep blue and Lundy was momentarily distracted by the thought that they'd go equally well with the blue eyes.

"I know I have the tops here somewhere," La Fiamma muttered, rummaging in an open drawer.

"But you never wear them and your guests usually don't." He smirked at the look the younger man gave him. "Don't worry. We'll survive without them."

"Yeah, well I don't usually sleep in these either," La Fiamma answered as he shoved in the drawer. "What do you have there?" He nodded toward the glass in the Texan's hand.

"Aspirin," Lundy answered as he handed over the pills and the glass. "It takes more than a couple to do the job." Seeing La Fiamma ready to protest, he forestalled it by raising his hand. "Don't even try. Seems to me it's how you got me in here."

"Yeah, but--"

"I saw how you went up the stairs, remember?" He reached over and picked up the silk pajamas. "Nice."

"Yeah, well I didn't have any old robes lying around." He held Lundy's gaze a moment longer then reluctantly swallowed the pills. As he turned to deposit the glass on the dresser, he couldn't help but mutter, "Give him an inch and he thinks he's Ben Casey."

"If I were, I'd pick me a prettier patient. This here's more like self-defense. You toss and turn like the other night and I might get bruised."

"More likely you'd get kicked out of bed," he retorted, but there was no rancor in his reply. He watched Lundy move off to the bathroom until a yawn made him realize how exhausted he was. "Thought you were dead tired," he called out half-accusingly as he flopped onto the bed.

"Yeah," Lundy admitted as he reentered the room. "Must've been something in that drink of yours." His voice trailed off as he noted the odd expression in the eyes that rested on him. "Whassamatter, don't they fit me right, or something?"

Their eyes held a moment longer, until La Fiamma's slid uneasily away. "No, not that. They seem to look better on you than me."

A skeptical denial was almost on his tongue when Lundy recalled how he had felt seeing his partner in his jeans and his spirit lifted. His back arched and his shoulders pulled back. His thoughts leaped ahead to...

But the wisecrack died as his attention steadied on the averted gaze.

Finally, he sat down on the unoccupied side of the bed and leaned against the backrest. "It seems like a lot of money just to sleep in," he said into the awkward silence.

Turning to face him, La Fiamma offered a grin. "Style, Lundy. It's called style. 24 hours a day." Then he reached for the lights.

Yeah, but you don't need these to prove it, Lundy thought, as he watched the fluid movements. *What am I saying? Good thing you can't read thoughts. Or I'd never live that down.*

Suddenly uncomfortable, Lundy slid down and away to lay on his back. "This's better than your couch, La Fiamma," he admitted as the lights went out. "Much obliged."

"I'm just glad you didn't insist on driving home," the other responded as he settled back into place. *It matters more than you know.*

"Almost like college days, huh?" came the soft quip into the darkness.

For a moment, La Fiamma hesitated. "Yeah, almost."

❁

La Fiamma rolled up against Lundy and pressed into him, instinctively seeking the warmth of the nearby body.

The sudden pressure woke Lundy and for a moment he sleepily revelled in how good the other felt, until he became aware of who it was leaning against him.

"Dammit, Joey, you insinuate yourself into all aspects of a person's life and assume you'll be accepted," he muttered. But his voice held more warmth than irritation.

For a moment, he lay there listening to the steady breathing of his sleeping companion, then he shifted until he could reach around La Fiamma and nestle him in the crook of his arm. He told himself that if he had to sleep with someone molded against him, it was more comfortable for both of them to have his shoulder used as a pillow.

As if answering the thought, La Fiamma murmured without waking and snuggled closer, causing Lundy to smile and shake his head.

Sleep, however, now eluded the Texan. The smooth, hard body pressed against his felt good, and the male smell of the flesh so close brought La Fiamma too clearly to mind. The image of La Fiamma trying on the jeans in front of his mirror stood out. With a volition of their own, his eyes roved over and catalogued every inch of the remembered muscular build, aware that he found everything pleasing to his sight. His throat constricted as the word flawless came to mind.

Though he stopped his imagination from undressing the image poised before the mirror, he flushed with warmth, a heat that became an itch as he became more and more conscious of the reality pressing into him.

"Been a long time..." he acknowledged to himself.

Caution told him he should push La Fiamma back to the other side of the bed, but he admitted to being beyond listening to it when he brought his other hand around to rest on his partner's nearby arm. For a few moments, he dared to run his fingers lightly along the hard-packed biceps, before wrapping that arm also around La Fiamma and cocooning him.

Settling down, Lundy was eventually able to live with the discomfort enough to fall asleep.

❁

La Fiamma felt safe and warm pillowed in this world. His arm was lying across a gently heaving surface. It felt so good to stretch against the long body that he slid his leg over and in the valley between the corded muscles. As he began to move his toes against the silky fabric, the hardness of the muscles underneath caused whispers in his mind.

When the fragments coalesced into a name, La Fiamma jolted awake. "Not again," he groaned, as he rolled quickly onto his back.

The sudden movements startled Lundy out of his sensual haze. He almost followed the retreating La Fiamma in protest when the words pulled him up short. Wide-awake, he rolled up onto his elbow. It was just light enough to make out his companion.

La Fiamma had his eyes closed and his jaw deliberately set.

"Again?" Lundy prodded and noted La Fiamma's nervous shifting. The younger man's embarrassment was easy to read.

When La Fiamma could no longer stand the feel of the bulldog scrutiny, he met Lundy's gaze. He couldn't hold it. He tried to laugh it off, but the sound came out strangled.

"Again?" Lundy repeated.

La Fiamma took a breath and avoided Lundy's gaze. "Sorry, man. I knew...shouldna done this. Not used to sharing a bed with... someone I'm not sleeping with."

Lundy continued to study the younger man. Nervousness. Embarrassment. Yes. But shouldn't there be something else? Something that seemed to be missing?

"That hold for guys as well?" Lundy tested.

La Fiamma squirmed. "Well, I'm not in the habit of sharing beds like this," he said as nonchalantly as he could manage. He closed his eyes as if he were drifting off.

It was enough for Lundy that La Fiamma didn't take offense at the implied question, and his answer didn't deny it. Realizing that nature had a way of being undiscriminating, he had a hunch about the tension he saw in the other man.

"No, you don't sleep with men, do you? But kids fool around, don't they? Experiment?"

The long-lashed lids flew open.

Bulls-eye! thought Lundy of his hunch and inwardly smiled.

"Levon, I've never been interested..." La Fiamma started in protest, then let it die as Lundy started to inch closer.

As he leaned over to kiss La Fiamma, Lundy saw the blue eyes widen in recognition of what was happening. He paused, close enough to almost feel La Fiamma, but not touching. Not without consent. Not without participation. La Fiamma was too important to chance losing. Hadn't that been the point of this whole trip?

La Fiamma could feel Lundy's breath on him. His pulse quickened. The tension in him began to intensify. Involuntarily his lips parted.

That was all Lundy needed to complete the kiss. As he felt La Fiamma respond, he deepened the kiss and rolled up against him. La Fiamma reached around and caressed the bare back, then pulled the Texan into a tighter embrace. Their tongues mated and parried until their bodies were screaming from lack of oxygen and their nerves from overload.

As they broke apart, they smiled shyly at one another...a look full of wonder and disbelief, vulnerability and joy, questions and hope. Until it broke down into silly grins and almost chuckles.

"How does a Mafia teenager rebel?" Lundy remarked, pressing a finger against La Fiamma's lips. "Couldn't shock the family by stealing hubcaps, now could you?"

La Fiamma answered by nipping Lundy's finger. Lundy chuckled and ran his finger down the strong jaw, down the throat, and came to rest on the collarbone. La Fiamma leaned into the touch, feeling the edge of the nail slice him in half. His groan brought Lundy's mouth down on his.

Heat seemed to melt their lips until their tongues molded to one. Until Lundy pulled away to kiss the path his finger had taken earlier. This time he tongued across the collarbone and drew a wet line back to the center underneath it, then followed the lines around the heaving pecs until he stumbled across the inviting nipple.

There he started with a kiss, then sucked gently on it, until La Fiamma sighs matched his. With a quick nip, he raised his head. La Fiamma opened his eyes, but the blue eyes were wide and unfocussed.

Lundy was a bit surprised that La Fiamma had let him take the lead. Somehow it didn't quite fit his fiery partner. Then again, the vulnerability behind the tough exterior had always attracted Lundy and he pressed his thumb against La Fiamma's lips.

As La Fiamma leaned into it, Lundy slid his fingers into the mouth and almost demanded La Fiamma suck them. With his other hand he caressed the Chicagoan's firm stomach, until his fingers hooked into the silk pants.

Meanwhile, La Fiamma used his hands to stroke down the cowboy's back until they came to rest on the silk-covered ass. He squeezed and rolled the round ass in his palms, then stroked his way back up the arched spine.

Very much in tune, La Fiamma turned as Lundy slipped off him until they faced each other side by side.

Their hands collided as each eagerly reached for the other's waistband. As their fingers interlaced, they locked mouths in a deep long kiss, then reluctantly broke apart.

The Chicagoan was the first to undress his partner. The blonde's head lolled back as La Fiamma fingers slid the material over his thighs and down, then traced his fingers up the inner leg until they cupped the balls and encircled the hardened shaft.

When Lundy could no longer stand the stimulation, he reached over and drew the black silk off the tightly muscled ass and down the sculpted legs. He too stroked the inner thighs that parted to accommodate him, cupped and gently squeezed the heavy balls, and pumped the thick hard shaft.

Soon Lundy was shifting so he could take the jutting shaft into his mouth and was pleased at La Fiamma's strangled gasp. The Northerner's hips undulated to the rhythm Lundy set, and Lundy needed no more than the movements and the sounds to visualize his partner's lack of control. Through the haze of his own need, Lundy could still feel the joy of satisfaction.

He slid his freed hand through the parted thighs and traced a finger along the cleft of the flat ass. As his finger began to burrow inside, Lundy could feel his own control slipping.

"No."

La Fiamma's body jolted rigid with the cry. Lundy snatched his hand away and jumped as if scalded. La Fiamma pulled away and flopped over onto his back. One word doused both their flames, leaving a quiet broken only by ragged breathing.

"You've never done this before," Lundy stated, in answer to the question he had no need to ask. It opened up a whole new line of musings.

First..., he reflected, then looked over at the younger man with the warmth that his thoughts brought. *...and perhaps...only....*

La Fiamma's heart thudded at the gaze. Then his disquiet returned. "And you have?"

Caught in the appeal of his musings, it was moments before the question registered. Lundy nodded. "A bit. Long time ago."

Two kids don't get no closer than that. The words describing Bobby Wilton had always lingered in La Fiamma's subconscious. Now without bidding they rose to confront him.

Lundy saw the jaw tighten, recognized the reaction, and couldn't help but be pleased. Yet the pleasure was short-lived as he waited for something more to be said, only to realize why La Fiamma never would.

"Okay then. Let's get on with it."

The resentful tone arrested Lundy's attention and stopped him. "Look--" he began reluctantly.

"No, don't say anything. It's all right." La Fiamma saw the doubt in Lundy's face. "It doesn't matter," he lied, deliberately squashing the hovering ghost. When Lundy still looked skeptical, La Fiamma began to caress him.

Lundy caught the younger man's fists, interlaced his fingers, and brought them to rest besides the dark head.

"You have **nothing** to prove," Lundy pointed out. "To me. To yourself. To anyone." When the dark head started to move in negation, he caught it between their entwined fists. "Listen to me," he urged. "We don't have to--"

"No," La Fiamma interrupted, "you had it right. For us it has to be all...or nothing."

The Texan shook his head. Lundy wanted desperately to claim his fiery partner as his own--it was in his nature to cleave flesh onto flesh in a bond that allowed for no others. Knowing that he could have La Fiamma in a way no one else ever had made it even harder to resist. But he also desperately wanted the younger man to give himself up in trust. The felt hesitation was more than he could overcome.

Lundy shrugged helplessly. "It doesn't matter..."

"Yes it does...matter...why...this way..." La Fiamma murmured awkwardly, trying desperately to find a bridge over his unsettled nerves.

The underlying fear calmed Lundy and he ran his hand across La Fiamma's cheek. "It's not what you think--more like the opposite."

Lundy could see La Fiamma didn't understand. He was reluctant to put it in words, but hadn't they fought so hard for truth between them?

"I think it's more your capacity to give," he attempted to explain. "In the time you've been here, it's your most striking quality. The most appealing. The most frightening. Sometimes it's like you demand it as your right, whether the other wants it or not. Now... I just want to wrap myself up in it."

The sexual flames may have been almost dampened but their emotional needs lay barely concealed, ready to explode at the slightest prick. "And you..." La Fiamma whispered, "what are you that's so different?"

Emotions were too close to the surface, too easily probed. Drowning in the vulnerable blue eyes, Lundy cast for a lifeline. "Hard and handsome," he tossed out, but the brown eyes twinkled over the smirk.

"That so, huh," La Fiamma matched in response, the audacity bringing forth comfort in a return to levity and safer ground. "You think you can prove it," he whispered as he pulled Lundy down to lock mouths. Lundy eagerly followed La Fiamma's lead, wrapping his arms around to press them together.

The feel of Lundy's body sliding against his almost made La Fiamma lose control. He had to tighten his grip to contain his mirth. Soon the two men's caresses turned to blatant pawing.

The heat built as the pawing became rougher and more localized, until La Fiamma moved to shove Lundy's hands down towards his ass. The encouragement dared Lundy to hope, especially when the hips raised to let him run his finger up the hot cleft.

But when Lundy pressed inward, his partner still flinched. Panting with the need to continue, he still backed off the instant La Fiamma stiffened. When the Northerner tried to draw him back, Lundy resisted. "This isn't...working...maybe...we should...slow--"

"No, dammit," La Fiamma ground. "I want to...but...can't control..." his words trailed off into ragged breathing as he couldn't bear to vocalize his thoughts. He realized that it was not about sex. Not about libido. Not even about caring.

He swore silently, letting his fears and ghosts tumble out. *Want to give you...what you gave.... But it's like being a virgin again. What if we go too far to face each other? Will you respect me in the morning doesn't sound so hokey if it's your partnership hanging in the balance.*

La Fiamma harrumphed at the irony as he clutched at his partner, grateful that Lundy didn't break the contact. A hunger beyond the physical. *I keep asking you for your trust. But I'm too afraid to give mine.*

Trust blocked by uncertainty. Fostered by questions. Answered by risk. A vicious circle. A circle he could break.

It wasn't hard for La Fiamma to get Lundy going again, but the uncertainty still hovered like an unwanted apparition. Determined to have it over and done white-hot squash the worrying--to bury the dead, he rasped, "Just do it, Lundy. Please."

And yet it was impossible to stop his heart from racing at the thought. *Just do it, before I change my_mind,* he repeated to himself. *If it ends, it ends.*

Ironic though if it finishes just when I was hoping to stay.

Depressed by the train of thought, La Fiamma didn't see Lundy's reaction to the statement. Indeed, he hadn't realized he had spoken aloud until he heard Lundy's retort.

"You're going nowhere, Chicago! Whatever happens here...or doesn't...has no effect on our partnership out there." Lundy rolled onto his back, as far away from La Fiamma as he could get.

It was something La Fiamma wanted desperately to believe but was afraid to. Time seemed suspended while he pondered his own image of himself.

La Fiamma rolled up to hover over Lundy until he was shoved away. "I don't have the answers for what we're doing, Levon. But I do know it's too late to pretend it isn't happening. Too late to stop."

He accented his words with light caresses, scooting closer every time a reluctant Lundy moved away. He skimmed across the hips and cupped the testicles before Lundy could bury them in the sheets. He nipped at the shoulder as he pressed his body along the wiry frame and massaged his prey until Lundy relaxed. Then he grabbed the shaft and started to pump until his own blood pounded in his veins.

His body cried out to be touched in kind and he almost whimpered his need...until he realized that Lundy intended to let him do all the running. In protest, La Fiamma rolled onto his back, bringing Lundy with him.

"Your turn, Levon," he rasped. "Don't leave me hanging."

In answer, Lundy enclosed the pulsating shaft in his fist. Then took it in his mouth.

Although La Fiamma quivered and arched in response, he forced out, "I need more."

"And I like it this way," Lundy returned and sucked harder. When the thighs trembled and parted to let him knead the knotted balls, he stopped long enough to smile. "You like it too."

"Levon--" he started as he arrested the bobbing head.

"Take it easy, Chicago. You know this feels good. Let's run with it."

"I need more."

Levon laid his cheek on the flat stomach, pondering what was driving the obstinacy. "There is no competition here, you know. You don't need to prove anything."

"I know." Urgency made La Fiamma clutch harder at Lundy. "Dammit, Lundy. Just do it." He yanked the Texan until Levon shifted to hover over him, almost touching.

"Pushy in bed, too," Lundy forced a scowl. "Why doesn't that surprise me?" He grabbed at the younger man's hands, pushed them down above his head.

"That so?" La Fiamma said, letting Lundy pin him down with his weight. "I need to do this--can you understand?"

It was a long time before Lundy nodded. Then he let go and whispered assent.

"All right." La Fiamma curled up eagerly around him, trapping him between his legs. "Tell me--was it this hard when you started?"

Lundy looked at him a moment, then confessed. "Worse."

The intimate revelation pleased La Fiamma and prompted Lundy to add, "Perhaps you should--"

The offer was silenced by a finger to the lips and a shake of the dark head. "That's not the answer and you know it. Later it will be, but for now, no."

The expressive blue eyes closed. "Trust between us," La Fiamma whispered.

Lundy remained still for a moment, just gazing at the closed eyes. "Is never misplaced," he finished, then slammed their mouths together as he slipped a finger underneath and against the hidden treasure.

Although La Fiamma still tensed as the digit pressed inside, Lundy only pulled back far enough to read both the desire and the fear in the blue eyes. Though he still felt tempted to hesitate, the expression that clouded the handsome face changed his mind. Instead, he offered, "I do know what I'm doing."

"I know."

"I'd never hurt you," Lundy felt obliged to add.

La Fiamma nodded and swallowed. "It isn't the physical that bothers me," he managed to confess.

"I know."

The words forged an unbreakable bridge on which Lundy gently massaged him. When the young man relaxed a bit, Lundy withdrew his finger and glanced towards the bathroom.

"Try the top drawer over here. Should have something." Lundy did as he was told and found a cream. When La Fiamma started to roll over onto his stomach, Lundy stayed him and pressed him back. The younger man obliged, shifting his hips and legs to give the Texan easy access.

Soft kisses on quivering eyelids accompanied the gentle swirling circles that helped La Fiamma relax further. Anticipation made Lundy's tumescence swell even larger. Especially when the straight, hard flagpole continued to wave invitingly at him and the muscles inside loosened around his fingers.

"Now, Levon."

Reluctantly letting go of the warm surface, Lundy bounced over and repositioned himself between his partner's legs. He had never felt harder in his life. As he gathered the strong legs up, he glanced up to see the expression in the clouded blue eyes. It was enough.

Still, Lundy's entry was tender and slow, despite the fiery heat in his blood that screamed for him to get on with it.

Joey's instinct to brace against the piercing intruder dissolved as its satin touch massaged the need growing inside him. Like water quenching sizzling earth, the tide was not fast enough for the parched ground. La Fiamma cried out in impatience and finished impaling himself.

"Pushy, pushy," Lundy murmured into his partner's hair, but was pleased all the same. A groan was his only answer. One that trailed off into the rhythmic slap of two bodies in tune with one another, neither leading, neither following.

Untold pleasure in the thump, thump, thump of perfect union.

The heat crested and the tension knotted up into its final throes until it released in a burst of cooling showers. Mating cries, they rode down the electric waves into a sweet warm lethargy. In the final moment, as if of one mind, they cleaved their bodies together, as if the sweat between them would glue them into one flesh.

They revelled almost mindless in the sensations, until finally consciousness returned. Moving slightly apart to get more comfortable, they adjusted the crumpled covers to help warm cooling flesh.

"Gawd," LaFiamma marveled, "you gave this up." A twinge of jealousy arose before he could brutally squash it.

"I met Carolyn." As if that answered it all.

La Fiamma's heart lurched. "And now?"

Snuggling up, Lundy burrowed his face into LaFiamma's neck. "Now I have you."

Feeling light-hearted, La Fiamma slipped his arm around the Texan and drew him closer. "Good."

Lundy waited until La Fiamma had just about drifted off to sleep before he said softly, "Besides, it never was this good before." He smiled when the quick squeeze let him know that his partner had heard him.

The unmistakable voice of Roger Daltrey blasted from the speakers as the Jimmy rolled up in front of La Fiamma's place. Both detectives looked tired and drawn.

La Fiamma roused himself. With his hand on the door latch, he remarked, "If I had known what it took to change your music habits, Levon--"

"It's been a rough day, La Fiamma. Don't get stupid. I thought it might motivate you to think."

"Music doesn't make me think, Lundy," the blue-eyed detective grinned as he lifted himself out of the truck. "It just makes me horny." He shut the door. "I'll just get a few things then we'll be off to your place."

"You could wait until you are invited."

Startled, La Fiamma stopped but didn't look back. "See you in the morning, Lundy."

"Joe." Lundy turned off engine but let the rock music still play.

At the rare use of his Christian name, LaFiamma turned to see an amused expression in the Texan's eyes.

"Bring enough so we don't have to stop by here for a few days."

Mollified, La Fiamma grinned. "If you're lucky I'll show you how ambidextrous I am."

"I've seen. I've seen. But I'm always open to an advanced course. Better get a move on...teach."

With a twinkle in his eyes, La Fiamma opened the door and reached in to flip the station to cowboy music. Then he bounced off.

Lundy grinned at the retreating back and punched the button. "K101 Rock welcomes..." blared out as he settled down to wait.

MY TANGLED STATE OF MIND

By Martha J. Bonds

Damn. He's so beautiful... Frank McPike shook his head as he watched the figure of Vince Terranova disappear up the stairs of the OCB safe house behind Roger Lococco. He'd noticed the attractiveness of the handsome young man from the first, but the beauty hadn't moved him quite this much. Not until he'd made love with Vince the night the Isle Pavot takeover had been foiled. It had been unexpected that the desire flared between them - or perhaps not so unexpected. But now that it had happened, now that Frank had let Vince know that it shouldn't happen again, Vince was all he could think about. And how beautiful Vince was.

Those incredibly long legs, so muscled and hard... The handsome, caring face; big, moist blue eyes... and absolutely the thickest eyelashes I've ever seen in my life... All alone in the kitchen of the safe house, Frank found himself blushing, getting hot under the collar. He couldn't stop thinking about the caring in Vince's blue eyes, or imaging how those muscular thighs would feel wrapped around his waist. He known for many years that he could probably respond to a man but, loving Jenny, he had determined never to act on those feelings, never to discover what sex with a man would really be like. Vince was changing all that. Letting it happen between them was turning McPike's safe, comfortable, recognizable world upside down, and a man like Frank McPike didn't like having his world turned upside down.

He thought about being with Vinnie in this very same room the morning after they'd coupled so passionately in his bed, how embarrassed Frank had felt, how happy, yet vulnerable, Vinnie had appeared. Frank hadn't known quite how to look at Vince, how to talk to him. A part of him wanted to reach out and touch, to make the connection between them feel real again. But he'd held back. Deep down, Frank believed it was wrong that they had done what they did. Not just because Vince was a man. Strangely enough, he felt less guilty about being with Vince than he had about sleeping with Lila Warfield. Even though at the time Jenny had temporarily left him, Frank had felt he'd cheated on her by sleeping with Lila. With Vince, it didn't feel like cheating. It felt like something man to man, different, something outside normal reality. Jenny, if she knew, wouldn't believe him. Like any woman, she didn't understand that having sex with someone could mean something different than making love with someone you loved. Two people feeling good together wasn't the same as being unfaithful. Well, it was, of course. Frank knew that, knew that he was rationalizing. But he still didn't feel that being with Vince had meant he was being unfaithful to Jenny.

It meant something else entirely.

It meant he had stepped across an invisible line, gotten closer to someone he was supposed to be supervising than he should. It wasn't so much that he didn't feel Vince was his equal, it was that he feared changing the personal relationship would affect their work relationship. Being with Vinnie had felt very, very good. So good in fact that Frank knew the real reason he didn't think it should happen again was because he might not be able to give it up. It was the kind of thing an uptight Irishman used to self-denial like Frank just couldn't allow himself to do.

[1] This is the 3rd story in the author's "Safe House" series. #1 was published in Indigo Boys and #2 will appear in Organized Frisky Business 2

He thought back to the morning after. Frank had awakened first and slipped out of their shared bedroom quietly so as not to disturb Vince. In the shower, he had washed away the traces their combined semen had left on his skin, feeling an incredible sadness in his heart. If Frank were someone different, the sex they had shared last night would have left him feeling great, not unhappy. He tried to think of how he might have made things come out differently, why he hadn't stopped Vince before they went too far. But he hadn't stopped Vince; he'd encouraged him, responding to his hug, to his touches, his kiss. Knowing Vince as he did, Frank realized that any dissent from him would have finished it between them before it began. No; he'd allowed it, allowed his own hormonal urges to take over. He'd opened his mouth to Vince's questing tongue, let him help him off with his shirt, let him fondle his straining, eager erection. He let Vinnie undress him, suck him... *Yeah, didn't want Vince to get the wrong idea, did I? Nothing like putting up a neon sign.* Frank decided, not for the first time in his life, that he was an idiot.

When he'd finished showering and dressing, he'd gone down to make some coffee. Vince had shown up in the kitchen first, however, and was at the table, looked tousled and sleepy. When he saw Frank, his eyes lit up, then darted away, his expression going diffident, as though he'd known Frank would be having misgivings.

"I made coffee," the Brooklyn accented voice offered with a trace of reticence.

"Good." Frank busied himself with pouring a cup. "Did you sleep all right?"

The blue eyes turned back to meet his own. Vinnie shrugged. "I woke up a couple times. Roger was kinda restless."

"Oh." The mention of Lococco caught him off guard. Frank had been totally wrapped up in his relationship with Vince and failed to reckon on the third party, the one who was the reason they'd ended up in the safe house to begin with. He'd thought Vinnie might have slept soundly after the intense orgasms they'd brought each other. Frank had.

"You didn't wake up?" Vince asked as though reading his thoughts. "I was afraid you would."

"No." Frank felt exposed, confused, embarrassed.

"You slept okay then?" Vinnie's voice rose a little on the question, as though he intended to ask much more.

Frank owed him an honest answer. He met the cautious eyes, moved closer, put his hand on Vince's shoulder. "I slept fine." He stared into the blue eyes, knowing he could easily lose himself in their depths but taking the chance anyway. "It's okay, Vince," he told him softly. "Is it okay with you?"

The adam's apple bobbed in Vince's throat. He nodded, a smile breaking on the hopeful face. "I'm okay, Frank."

The way he said, 'Frank' did strange things to McPike's breathing. He took a deep breath and stepped away, sitting down in the chair across from Vince. "Is there anything in the fridge for breakfast?" he wondered, grasping at the first topic to come to mind.

"Yeah, I think so." Vince followed his lead, getting up to check the refrigerator. "Eggs...orange juice...bacon... Hey, Frank, you want me to rustle us up somethin9999'?"

"That'd be nice, Vince." He sat there, watching the young operative eagerly getting out of the food, searching the cupboards for pans and utensils, looking over his shoulder every so often as if to make sure Frank was still there. McPike tried to keep his expression neutral. He didn't want to make Vince think he'd changed his mind about what he'd said last night. The part about not letting it happen again.

No, Frank didn't want Vinnie to think he'd changed his mind. It couldn't happen again. Not if Frank wanted to stay sane.

McPike had been away from the Bethesda safe house for nearly a week, giving information to the higher-ups, following what was going on with the Senate investigating committee. He'd stayed in Quantico, not wanting to call attention to his frequent trips back and forth from D.C. He had called Lifeguard regularly and thereby learned that Vince was reporting in, and that Lococco was staying put, but he had no actual communication with Vinnie himself. Maybe that was for the best.

Frank had kept in touch with Jenny and Drake, too, but he didn't have time to run up to Jersey to be with them. When Jenny said she understood, there was something brittle and overly sincere in her voice and he wondered if she'd been drinking again. He'd started to ask, but she cut him off in a tone that brooked no dissent. He worried about Drake growing up with a mother who drank too much and a father who was never there.

Still, staying away from Jenny had had its good points. Thoughts of Vince and what had happened were proving to be a distraction at work and Frank didn't know how they would have affected his dealings with his wife and child. Frank was grateful he was spared that. Instead, he had been free to obsess on his night with Vince, to go over and over in his mind what he should have said, what he should have done to keep it from happening. He couldn't stop those thoughts any more than he could stop reliving the experience. Being with Vince sexually had touched something deep at Frank's core, taken possession of him and wouldn't let go. Thoughts of Vinnie popped into his mind at the most disconcerting times, fantasy images appeared, ideas that took the one experience and embellished on it. Yes, Frank was free to obsess about it, to embarrass himself by his lustful thoughts. To try to stop them and to be ashamed of himself when he couldn't. And to promise repeatedly that he would never, ever do it again.

Then, he'd returned to the safe house. This morning, he had been the one to cook breakfast and to offer what he made to Vince. He'd missed him in the last week. He was concerned about having left him to deal with Lococco alone, although he knew they were close, that if anyone could handle Lococco, it would be Vinnie. They were part way through breakfast when Roger ambled into the kitchen.

He looked better than he had the last time McPike had seen him, the shadows were gone from beneath his eyes, the haunted distance was missing from his expression. Somehow, he was coming to terms with everything. And when he told Frank he intended to testify at the Senate hearings, he sounded strong, unworried. Frank knew courage like that didn't come easily or without price. But perhaps Lococco had faced death so often that he didn't fear it anymore. After breakfast, Vince had followed Roger back upstairs.

Frank was left standing by himself in the kitchen, feeling the odd man out. Roger and Vinnie had shared things he could not. They had been in the trenches together, battling for their sanity against Mel Profitt; they had become brothers in arms. Frank knew Ketcher had ordered Roger to kill Vince and he knew Roger hadn't been able to do it. There was a bond between them, one that Frank couldn't understand or share. Picking up his cup of coffee, he took it with him into the living room and sat down with the Washington Post. Maybe reading the newspaper would help his mood.

The days passed with their tensions and concerns, Frank watching as Vince struggled with his need to help Roger by testifying as a Federal agent and the OCB demands to keep his cover. Vinnie had thrown that comment to him about wanting to have a normal life playing with his kids and fighting with his wife. That statement hurt Frank, but McPike didn't want to examine the reasons why. Was it said to get back at Frank for telling Vince he didn't want to be intimate with him again? Frank pushed the notion aside, embarrassed for even thinking it. Was he flattering himself? He should be relieved Vinnie felt the same way he did, that he also wanted a regular, normal life with a wife and family. Vince was as straight as he was; what they'd done was a momentary aberration, a way of sharing comfort, nothing more. And besides, Vince wasn't capable of saying or doing something just to make someone else feel bad. He probably didn't even realize the way Frank had taken the remark.

It occurred to Frank that he and Vince hadn't been alone since that first night here. Vinnie had moved into another of the bedrooms rather than staying in the one they'd shared; Frank didn't want to think about why. Maybe Vinnie just liked a double bed better. He was probably more comfortable when he was able to sprawl out. Frank had a sudden picture of the big man tumbled appealingly in a wide, unmade bed. Maybe it was better he and Vince hadn't found themselves alone. It was disconcerting to have his imagination constantly supplying him with ideas he would never have considered in the past, ideas part of him wanted to follow through, ideas it was hard to ignore.

He'd blown the chance to be alone with him after Uncle Mike had tried to show Vince how foolish testifying openly would be. Vinnie opened the door wearing a pillowcase as a hood with eye holes cut out of it, answering with a flippant comment. The sarcasm cut into Frank and he let his own anger and impatience with Vince get the best of him. Instead of talking, he simply shut the door, cutting himself off from Vince until the younger agent calmed down. Yet Frank wished he hadn't done that. He should have gone into the room. He wanted to apologize for what he'd done, for playing him that way, using his relationship with the uncle to back him into a corner. No wonder Vince was angry.

But Frank didn't want to lose Vince. He didn't want to lose him as a field agent and he certainly didn't want him to lose his life to some hood who wanted revenge, either. He knew Vinnie always got too close to things. He was close to Roger the way he'd been close to Sonny, so close he couldn't see the big picture. Frank, as his supervisor, had to see the big picture. He tried to tell himself Vince would too eventually. The work he did meant too much to Vince for him to ever give it up.

But damn, it hurt to close that door between us, Frank thought in resignation. He thought about his response, the short-tempered anger that had blazed in him at Vince's sarcasm. Frank knew he wasn't the most patient of men, that his own temper often made him speak and act rashly, without thinking of the other person. Sometimes his anger was a shield, McPike knew, a buffer between the world that could hurt and his true feelings. It was that way this time. He cared too much about Vinnie. He knew he'd better start putting up barriers, keep his feelings in perspective. So he didn't open the door again. Couldn't face whatever his actions might be if he opened it.

"What'd he say?" Uncle asked as Frank returned to the room.

McPike shrugged, dropping into a chair.

"Frank?" The Lifeguard seemed like patience incarnate, waiting to hear from Frank, sounding as though he fully expected Frank to confide in him. The way Vince did.

But Frank McPike wasn't made that way. All his life, he'd kept his problems to himself, preferring to solve them on his own instead of burdening someone else. He'd always felt admitting he needed to talk about something would be a sign of weakness. Talking didn't help, it only opened you up to hurt. And anyway, this certainly wasn't the time to change his style; what was he going to say, "*Uncle Mike, I had sex with Vince and now I can't concentrate on the job...*"?

"Frank?" Lifeguard questioned again, sounding impatient.

He looked up, met the other man's concerned dark eyes. "He's gonna need a little more time to cool off."

"He'll be okay," Uncle soothed. He looked hard at Frank. "Will you?"

"Me? I'm fine." Frank shifted in his chair, feeling too exposed, too vulnerable. "I'm just not gonna be sorry when this whole mess is over."

And now Roger was gone from the safe house, having left after an attempt on his life had been made. Frank remembered how Vince had sided with Roger when Lococco had demanded the car keys so he could get away and possibly elude the

men trying to kill him. In those moments, Frank had felt cut off from Vince; he hadn't even looked at Frank when he told him to give Roger the keys. It had worked out in the end. Lococco had survived to finish his testimony and Frank had to grudgingly admit his respect for the former war hero.

McPike glanced at his watch. It was after three o'clock and he didn't know where Vince was. One of the operatives downstairs had told him Terranova had left quickly after receiving a message. Frank knew it had to be from Lococco.

A door opened and closed downstairs. Frank pushed his glasses up and rubbed at his eyes. That was probably Vince returning from seeing Roger. He'd come up in a few minutes. Then Frank could make sure that he was all right. Then Frank could finally get some sleep.

Moments passed and still Vince didn't appear. Sighing, Frank headed down to see what was keeping him. Maybe he'd brought Lococco back with him.

He descended to the living room, hesitating when he saw Vince standing alone before the fireplace. He was leaning against the mantle, shoulders bowed, tension emanating from his long form. He held a glass of liquor in his left hand, but he didn't drink from it.

Vince's left hand was trembling, ever so slightly. All Frank's senses came alert, concern for his field agent, for his friend, uppermost in his mind. He didn't intrude on Vince's introspection; he waited, wondering what the man needed at this moment.

Vince straightened, suppressed agitation evident in the movement. He looked at the glass in his hand, lifted it and downed the liquor in one gulp. Then he threw the glass into the fireplace, the glass shattering against the brick.

"Hey!" Frank strode forward, grasping Vince by the shoulders. "What's goin' on?"

Vinnie turned, and Frank saw blue eyes filled with anguish. He knew before Vince said the words.

"Roger's dead." Vinnie's voice broke, his shock and horror lashing out at Frank.

"Who did it?" Frank's own voice was patient.

"How the hell do I know, Frank?" Vince raged. "CIA, one of Ketcher's pals, somebody from the Bureau, whoever! What does it matter?" The tormented eyes looked up, found a small vase. It was hurled into the fireplace along with the glass.

Frank remained patient. He knew what this horror felt like, knew there would be no peace for Vince until he passed through the emotions beating at him. "Tell me about it."

Vince regained control with effort, leaning with both hands against the mantle. "He sent me a message." The voice was roughened, lost. "I was followed. When I got to the boat dock, Roger was finishing loading a small outboard craft. He saw me, but he also saw the other cars pulling up right behind me. He jumped into the boat and took off." The dark head bowed. "The boat exploded."

"Have the authorities been called in to investigate?"

"I didn't wait around." Vince turned on him, anger flashing from the blue eyes. "What's to investigate, Frank? What are they gonna find but a blown up boat and little pieces of fish food? Dammit — he didn't deserve that. Not after what he did today!"

"I know. You're right." The platitudes sounded hollow, but Frank had to say them anyway. He didn't know what he could do for Vince. The man was vibrating with agitation, anger and grief tearing him to pieces. As Frank watched, he looked around as though searching for something else to break. Finding nothing, he pounded his clenched fists against the mantle. Frank moved toward him.

"Come on now. That's not gonna help matters." He felt the way he did when he tried to talk Drake out of being upset, ineffective. Vince met his eyes, looking wounded. Frank took a deep breath and reached out. "I'm sorry, Vince. He was a good man." Frank's hand found Vince's shoulder.

The anguished face turned toward him. And then Vince was in his arms, holding tight, body molding to Frank's as though McPike was life itself. A choked sob broke from him.

Frank had known that one touch would be all it would take to get to Vince, to allow him to open up and vent his feelings. He held onto the grieving man, aware with every fiber of his being of Vince's need, Vince's strength, Vince's openly breaking heart. Frank's own heart opened wide, caring so much for Vinnie in this moment that he hurt. Their first night in this house, Vince had needed one kind of attention from him, now he needed something else. Giving to Vince sexually had come very easily, too easily for Frank's piece of mind. Comfort like he needed now was something Frank was less sure he knew how to provide. It was hard for him to be emotional, yet so easy for Vince.

And Vinnie's need was so great. Frank found himself holding tight, stroking the taut back tenderly, murmuring soothingly. Vinnie filled his senses; he was warm and trembling against him, hard muscles and soft skin, strong arms and a pounding heart.

"Frank..." The word was breathed out, the one syllable carrying so much meaning Frank couldn't comprehend. He tried to tell himself Vince was just upset, any friend would have elicited this release from him, but he knew he was kidding himself. The hands tightening their grip on his shirt told him he was the one Vince needed now. He was the one from whom Vince would find comfort.

Frank was staggered by the implication, awestruck. He couldn't understand why Vince needed him so. Yes, Vinnie had learned to trust him as his field supervisor. His confused heart tried to tell him there was more to Vince's response. But Frank steadfastly refused to listen to it. It couldn't be. It couldn't.

"Let's go upstairs," he murmured, surprising himself. He wondered why he couldn't just pull out of the embrace, reassert the necessary boundaries. But it felt too good to have Vince in his arms, too good that he had turned to Frank this way. He patted Vinnie's shoulder, shifting his hold on the tall man, turning them toward the stairs. He wanted to allow Vince to let go away from the prying eyes of the men still guarding this house.

He met Vince's eyes as they ascended the stairs. They looked huge and vulnerable, moist with unshed tears. They did crazy things to Frank's heart. He wanted to comfort Vinnie. He didn't want to think about giving him anything but that.

He guided Vince to the room they'd shared the first night at the safe house, this time going to the bed where Vince had slept, not the one Frank had used. Not the one where they'd had sex. Frank felt his cheeks burning anyway just from thinking about it. He was glad Vinnie was too upset to notice.

Instead, Vince clung to him tighter than before, pressing against him as Frank eased them to sit on the side of the bed. He heard another choked sob, Vinnie's face burying itself against his shirt. And then his grief broke free, the tears wetting Frank's shirt front, his hands gripping and pulling as though by getting closer and closer to Frank his pain would ease.

"Roger..." Vinnie gasped. "Roger's dead..." He repeated the words as though he could still not comprehend them.

Frank patted his shoulder, feeling inadequate. "I know, Vince."

Vinnie looked up, his lashs sooty black, spiked by tears. "They all die, don't they, Frank? They all die..."

"No," he told him softly. "You've been through this before I don't know why it's happened to you. But it isn't always that way. And these people don't die because of you. It's because of the lives they've led."

"Damn. Dammit." Vince shuddered against him. Frank didn't know what he was damning: the facts as they'd played out, the truth of what he'd just told Vince, his refusal to accept it. Or maybe just Frank in general.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, the weight of Vince's world slipping onto his shoulders. Vinnie cared so much, so deeply; this work took such a toll on him. "I'm sorry, Vinnie."

The words seemed to relieve Vince's anger. He shuddered against Frank again, his head again dropping to Frank's chest. Frank could feel him crying.

Slowly and carefully, he adjusted their position on the bed, shifting until he was able to lean against the headboard, Vince resting against him, head on his chest, lower body pressed along his side. He held Vinnie as he mourned, wordlessly stroking his back.

Vince didn't give in to the tears for long. They eased in a few moments, as though the pain was too deep. He lay as though exhausted against Frank's side, his hands relaxing their grip on Frank's shirt. One arm was still wrapped around Frank's waist, the other slid down to his lap.

McPike felt himself go hot with embarrassment. The arm innocently grazed his groin, sending a shiver of helpless need through him. He'd fantasized the feel of Vince close to him, now those foolish thoughts were going to get him into trouble. He tried to shift unobtrusively; the result was to brush Vince's arm lower on his lap. Frank was starting to harden.

He cleared his throat, patting Vince in a parody of a father's comfort. "You okay now?" he asked, his voice barely working.

Vince eased back, his arm leaving its dangerous position. He nodded, rubbing a hand over his wet face. He made no apology for his outburst, though, and Frank admired him for that. He wished he could feel so deeply, so openly as Vinnie, even as he sought to quell the visceral reaction he was having to his nearness. It wasn't good to feel so much. It couldn't be...

Vince sighed, offering a half smile. "You didn't know him, Frank. He could be a cold-hearted killer, but he had a conscience. He was a hero today. For admitting what he did at that hearing, he knew he could be prosecuted. He might have even gotten the death penalty. But he said he wouldn't take immunity or the witness program. He wanted to go on his own terms." Vinnie clenched a fist and his tone hardened. "That's what pisses me off. That somebody could get him like this. He didn't have a chance..."

"I know, Vince," Frank offered soothingly. "But he knew this was inevitable. Maybe he figured it was his time, that he was in control. He managed to hide out long enough to get all his testimony in."

"Yeah..." Vinnie nodded but seemed unconvinced and uncomforted. "I didn't get to say good-bye." The words had been almost inaudible. "I wanted to say good-bye to him, Frank."

McPike stroked the damp hair back from Vinnie's temple, his heartbeat picking up with the intimacy of the gesture. Vince's head followed Frank's hand, leaning into the touch as if to ask for more. Frank slid his fingers into the wealth of dark hair, wishing he could take the pain away, exchange it with pleasure. Vinnie was so vulnerable just now. But McPike knew those thoughts were inappropriate to the situation. Vince was probably confused enough about what they had done and Frank's response to it, and his grief over Roger was so fresh. So fresh and so strong... Vinnie felt so deeply when he lost someone he'd bonded with. Frank smoothed the black strands, thinking about Vince and Roger, the bond they had formed. *Did they — ? Was it possible?* The very concept startled him. Frank had thought Lococco was straight... He flashed on an image of Vinnie's dark hair caught between Lococco's fingers, of the blue eyes flashing fire in response to the other man's kiss, and felt his cock stiffen so suddenly it made his head spin. He clamped down hard on the bizarre reaction, refusing to think about what it might imply. *Jealousy? Or is there some perverse and unexplainable thrill to the idea of Vince being held in Roger's arms?* Vinnie leaned close to him again, resting his head on Frank's chest and McPike was relieved that Vince couldn't see his flaming cheeks. He desperately tried to suppress his suddenly unreliable libido, shoving his confusion into the darkest corner of his mind, where he kept all those things he knew he

shouldn't think about. He held Vince patiently, willing the blinding arousal to go away.

"Frank?" Vince's voice came to him after he'd rested quietly for many long moments.

"Yeah, Vince?" He kept his voice neutral while carefully stroking the other man's shoulder, relieved that he was now in more control.

"I'll testify behind a screen, if that's what you want." The words were offered shyly.

"It's not what I want," Frank told him gently. "It's the only way. If you want to be believed."

Vinnie looked up, the tear-washed eyes so clear and pure Frank wanted to protect the man forever. "I do want them to believe me. I have to do it for Roger's sake."

"You'll do a good job," Frank reassured. "I know you will."

The vulnerable hope in the azure eyes was almost more than Frank could bear.

It was just before dawn. The safe house was quiet, Frank feeling certain he was the only one still awake. In the bed next to his own, Vinnie was breathing deeply, having dropped into a deep slumber soon after he finished crying. Frank envied Vince his ability to sleep when he was depressed. Depression only served to keep Frank awake nights.

McPike sat up on the side of his twin bed, gazing across at Vince. In the pre-dawn light, he looked so innocent. It hurt to think about the pain the young man had suffered in the past two years. Frank loved to see him smile and laugh. He wondered if he'd ever see him that way again.

Don't be nuts, he told himself sternly. *He'll get himself together. He managed after Sonny, he'll manage after this. As much as he abhors part of this work, the rest of him knows its necessary. He signed on to do the job, to put away the bad guys. Vince has a natural talent for deep cover. If he didn't hurt sometimes, he wouldn't be as good at it.*

Still, it was a shame. Frank watched the even rise and fall of his chest, admiring the Roman planes of his face, the way the moonlight kissed the soft, sensuous waves of black hair. There was that one thick lock that insisted on falling over his forehead, no matter how Vince tried to tame it back.

Frank halted himself in mid-reach. He hadn't even realized he'd moved, reaching out a hand to smooth back the unruly lock of hair. Just to feel that silky length against his fingers... No, he couldn't afford the risk. He had come to terms with the feelings he had for Vince. He wouldn't be able to function otherwise. If he'd only realized that the one experience would make him need Vinnie so much, he would never have done it. It was like forbidden candy; one taste and you were off the diet for good. It suddenly occurred to Frank that he'd been on a diet most of his life, settling for what he thought was good for him instead of what he really needed, really wanted.

No, come off it, he told himself roughly, *you can't live on chocolate. It's very sweet, but it's not what keeps you healthy. We all have to grow up and do what's sensible.* That's what Frank McPike had always done. What he would continue to do.

Very quietly, he eased out of bed, needing to put a little space between himself and the handsome man sprawled in the next bed. Without having Vinnie right in front of him, Frank might be able to think a little more clearly. He drew on his robe and slipped quietly out of the room and downstairs.

The house was quiet and dark, the living room pale in the glow from the street lights. Frank walked, paced actually, thinking, willing himself to return to the safe life he'd always lived.

His eyes fell on the black leather jacket tossed over the back of the couch. Vinnie's. Where he'd dropped it upon returning from seeing Roger's boat blow up. Frank was drawn to it like a magnet.

He picked it up, bringing it up close to his chest. He closed his eyes, drawing a deep breath. The

leather was butter soft, warm, scented with the woodsy aftershave Vince wore. Frank felt lightheaded just breathing its fragrance. He was driving himself crazy, letting a single instance of insanity throw him into total confusion. He took one deep breath, trying to ignore the fragrant leather in his arms, and moved to put the jacket down.

A piece of paper fluttered from the pocket and landed on the floor.

Frank bent to pick it up, and his eyes caught the hastily scribbled message.

"Try to get here by three a.m. I want to say good-bye." It was signed simply, "R.L."

Roger's note to Vince. Frank folded the paper and returned it to the jacket pocket.

He pulled the paper back out, looked at it again.

"I want to say good-bye."

An emotional connection. A voiced need. And Vince had intended to answer it. *"I didn't get to say good-bye. I wanted to say good-bye to him, Frank."*

Once again, an image came to Frank of the two men entwined on a bed. This time, it didn't feel like an unreasonable speculation. It could have happened. Probably did happen. Frank closed his eyes, allowing the image to coalesce in his mind. He knew it the way any cop knew something had happened, no matter how much the involved individuals might try to deny it. It had happened. Sometime back when they were working for Mel Profitt, that's when it must have begun. Vince had no qualms about being with another man. And Lococco, he'd seen and done so many outrageous things that a little man to man sex probably didn't even rank as being out of the ordinary.

Frank thought about Roger and Vince, allowing his mind to contemplate the idea.

A part of him hurt, thinking about it.

A part of him didn't mind. It was all right. Vince needed someone who could be with him the way he wanted. Frank hadn't been able to meet his needs that way. Roger must have.

It was probably a good thing Frank had stayed away from the safe house so long. It would have doubtless been uncomfortable for Vince if he'd been underfoot. This way, he'd had a last few days with Roger.

Now, Roger was dead.

No wonder Vince was hurting so bad. Frank's heart ached for him. A part of Frank wanted to go to him, hold him tenderly, let him know he understood now.

But Frank knew he couldn't do that. Vinnie probably wouldn't want him to know about his relationship with Roger. That was something private, between the two of them. If Vince was gay, or bi, or whatever they called it these days if you could respond to a man or a woman, then Frank didn't feel guilty about being with him. And only a little guilty about saying no after the first time. Roger had given Vince what he needed that Frank couldn't.

Roger was dead.

Frank abruptly cut off all thoughts on the subject. That was the trouble; he was thinking too damn much these days. Roger was dead. Vince Terranova was alive. And he needed a partner, a field supervisor that could ease his transition from one difficult case to the next one. He didn't need someone who was as confused as an adolescent with acne messing with his mind. Frank lay the jacket gently over the back of the couch, tucking the note from Roger back into its pocket.

Then he turned to go back upstairs.

Vince had turned over in bed while Frank had been gone. Now he lay curled on his side, face so vulnerable that it made Frank's insides ache. He drew in a breath and held it, unable to tear his gaze away from Vince. He had to get some sleep. Tomorrow was going to be a rough day.

That lock of hair was still tumbled over Vinnie's smooth forehead. Still holding his breath, Frank cautiously reached out, tenderly caressing the errant lock, closing his eyes at the coolness of the long, dark strands.

Tomorrow was going to be a rough day, indeed. Sighing, thinking of tomorrow and all the rough tomorrows to follow, Frank crawled into bed.

"Frank... it is what it is."

Vince reached over and squeezed Frank's shoulder. A moment ago, he'd shaken Frank's hand. Stunned with the realization that Vinnie meant what he'd said, that he was resigning, Frank could only stare at him. His hand tingled from Vince's brief clasp. His shoulder burned. His eyes stung. And he couldn't say another word.

Vinnie moved away, toward the door. Frank couldn't turn to watch, didn't want to know if Vince cast him one more look or not. If he turned, he wouldn't have been able to predict what he might do - he might run after him, grab him and hold him, beg him not to quit... kiss him good-bye... Frank's face flushed with heat, embarrassed to be thinking such things.

He listened to Vince's footsteps in the foyer as he opened the folded paper. He attempted to read it, but the words blurred, ran together.

Why didn't I see this coming? Vince said he didn't think of this job as who he is... but I turned a deaf ear.

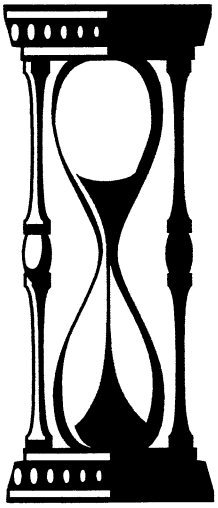
Vince had testified, as they had decided, from behind closed doors, his voice electronically scrambled so even that would not identify him. Frank had watched the broadcast, his heart racing, concern and pride bringing mist to his eyes. His cover was preserved. Vince could still work undercover.

And yet, now he said he never would again. *"I never want to see another lie as long as I live."* That's how he put it. *"You're okay, Frank."* An echo of the words he'd said to McPike after making love to him. *Yeah, I'm okay*, Frank scoffed to himself, *I'm so okay I'm probably the biggest lie you ever met.*

He suddenly needed to see him. Hurrying to the window, he glimpsed the tall form climbing into a cab in front of the safe house. He memorized the look of thick black hair, of the faded denim jacket, the jeans molded to the long legs. In his mind, he could see the proud, sad, earnest face, its hopes and dreams vanquished. Vinnie had come to him full of dreams and Frank had watched them be destroyed, unable to help, to make any of it change. He watched the cab pull away, a piece of his heart going with it.

"I want you, Vince." McPike whispered the words, wishing he could have said them a moment ago. "I don't know what it means, I don't know why, but I do."

All he had to do now was forget.



TRILANDER

by Arch Ant

"He's still dead," Ritchie complained, washing off the last of the dirt from Duncan's body.

"So would you be if you spent four weeks buried in rock," Methos explained. "Why revive only to be suffocated again? The body shuts down until conditions improve. Think of it as a kind of hibernation. Eventually he'll wake up." Methos moved away from the bed where he had re-aligned the Highlander's broken body.

"We don't have time to waste. Those goons are due in court tomorrow, and if Duncan doesn't give his evidence, they'll go free," Ritchie complained.

The older immortal shrugged. "What are you worried about? It's not as if they can kill you!"

"Maybe not, but if they carry through on their threat, and burn down the dojo, Duncan's gonna be awfully pissed with me," Ritchie moaned, staring resignedly at the ceiling, thereby missing the speculative look Methos cast his way.

A small **crack** drew their attention back to the Highlander. The interrupted lines of arms and legs were assuming their original position, slowly fusing together as the immortal body repaired itself in order to awaken.

The oldest living immortal nodded. "It begins."

Four hours later, Ritchie still sat by his mentor. He looked up as the man he had first known as Adam Pearson exited the lift. "Everything's back in place, but he still hasn't woken," he reported.

"Give him time," Methos counseled; looking about the combined bedroom/kitchen/lounge for a clock. "Speaking of which, what is the time?"

"Eleven am".

Methos paced around the room, stopping every now and then to pick up and discard the various antiquities and object d'art. "Do you know where Amanda is?" he asked suddenly.

The red-headed youth frowned. "France, I think. Or Germany. She said the pickings were better on the Continent. Why?"

"Oh, no reason."

"Don't lie to me, Methos. You're worried. I can tell. And why do you want Amanda? What's going on?" Ritchie surged to his feet, stalking towards Methos, who retreated, gesturing for the young man to calm down.

"I know of a way to bring Duncan back faster, that's all. But I'm not sure you could manage it. Amanda or Michelle would have been better suited."

"Why can't I do ... whatever it is?"

"It involves a Quickening." Methos began, but Ritchie interrupted him.

"I hate to tell you this, but Duncan's in no condition to chop off someone's head!"

Methos continued, ignoring the angry outburst. "As I was saying, a Quickening. But not the type that comes from playing the Game. A more ... personal Quickening."

"Cut to the chase, man. What are you talking about?"

"Sex."

Ritchie snorted. "While I agree Amanda is certainly enough to wake the dead, even she has to have something to work with."

"No, you misunderstand me. It wouldn't be Amanda with Duncan. It would be Amanda and me. Sex between two immortals can produce the same energies as a Quickening."

"Not that I don't believe you, Methos, but that's never happened with me before. And Duncan's never mentioned it."

Falling into a lecturing mode, learned and made second nature in the years he had tutored the sons and scions of households the world over, Methos continued. "You probably aren't in the habit of sharing a bed with an immortal, while in close proximity to a hibernating immortal. I discovered it by accident in 289. Darius was in much the same state as Duncan is now, but Rebecca and I knew he'd revive soon enough. And .." he faltered, looking away from Ritchie before he went on. "Well, we were ... and then the energy just as we ... well, it produced a Quickening that revived him. Immediately." He didn't add that the young Roman general had woken with an enormous appetite for sex and that it had taken both Rebecca and he over twenty hours to satisfy the immortal.

"So you need another immortal to have .. sex with. With Duncan in the same room."

"Yes."

"And there are no other immortals in town at the moment." Ritchie ran down the options.

"Except you."

"Me? You want me to ..." Ritchie fell silent, unable to even complete his sentence. "With me?" he continued, voice half strangled with surprise, fear and something he'd rather not think about.

"Actually Ritchie, it would be better with someone who could at least enjoy it. I'm not really into rape, and if you're freaking out at the thought, the act would be worthless. Both immortals need to generate the energies required, and I'm afraid you wouldn't be able to."

Half stung at the implied slur on his masculinity, Ritchie nonetheless agreed that he'd be too embarrassed/afraid/scared to enjoy such an encounter.

Suddenly their attention was drawn to the back door as the Song that heralded an immortal presence sang through their minds.

"Will I do?" Conner MacLeod asked, stepping out of the dark.

"Ah, Conner, this is .."

Conner interrupted him, walking forward to hold out his hand in greeting. "Jason Scott, wasn't it?"

Methos smiled, returning the handshake. "It was, then. It's Adam Pearson now." The firm grip, steady look and overall aura of the man reassured Methos. He could do whatever was necessary to awaken Duncan with this immortal.

"So what has my clansman done now that requires such an ...unusual awakening?"

While Ritchie detailed the last two month's happenings, Methos took the time to look over the man he'd last seen over 100 years before.

The public house was small and crowded, the flickering gas lanterns adding their heat and aroma to the atmosphere, but doing little to light the farthest corners. Jason Scott sat in one such corner, surrounded by his students, whom he had earlier regaled with stories of daring do and high adventure of days gone by, all carefully couched in the third person. Now he was quiet, watching as the oh-so-briefly lived mortals chattered and drank, unaware that his expression had become morose and forbidding. He caught his breath as the Song filled his mind, and looked up to see a tall stranger walking towards him. Quickly, he spread his hands out on the tabletop. If this was an honest opponent, the lack of a sword and the crowded room would preclude any hostility. If not...

The stranger halted beside him. "Might I have a word, Sir," he asked formally. Methos nodded, turning sideways to his students as the other immortal purloined a nearby chair. "You have no sword?" the stranger asked.

"I'm taking a holiday from the Game," Methos answered.

The stranger frowned briefly. "This isn't holy ground," he stated the obvious.

"Then I have been sorely mislead by my students," Methos replied, allowing himself to look disconcerted.

The stranger stared at him in confusion for a minute, before he laughed. "I am Conner MacLeod, of the clan MacLeod", he introduced himself. "Jason Scott." Methos offered his current name with a nod. "Would you like a drink?"

They had stayed in that quiet corner for hours, discretely talking of times past, and of the days to come, until the last of Methos' students excused himself from the table. They had parted on friendly terms and it had not taken Methos long to check on Conner MacLeod through his Watcher connections. The older Highlander was a young immortal compared to Methos, but that was true of every immortal he met nowadays. It had been almost 2000 years since he'd met anyone older, and he'd taken her head in Gaul, as he marched in Caesar's army to bring civilization to the British tribes.

Methos refocussed his attention on the here and now to find his gaze caught by the Highlander.

"Back in the Game?" Conner asked, obliquely referring to their first meeting.

"Unwillingly," he replied. "By the way, my name is Methos," he said, ignoring Ritchie's start of surprise. He hadn't revealed his true identity to Ritchie until very recently, and then only because Ritchie had overheard Duncan calling him by that name.

"Methos?" Conner was surprised. "I thought Methos was ...."

"Dead? A myth? A legend? It's a very useful reputation, that."

"Your speech does not match your supposed age," Conner questioned doubtfully.

Methos laughed. "My first language is unknown to any living being. Even I don't remember what little I knew of it. If I didn't change with the times, I'd be very obvious. And obvious equals dead, now that the Game is being played in earnest."

Conner nodded in agreement. In 400 years, he had lost or overlaid his highland brogue, except in times of great stress. In over 5000 years, he supposed that even that habit would be superseded.

Ritchie interrupted their conversation, almost vibrating with eagerness to be gone now that another immortal was here. "Um, Duncan needs to be in court at 10 am, tomorrow," he reminded, leaving as fast as he could, stopping only to flip the closed sign over on the dojo door.

Conner checked his watch, swearing as he noted that only twenty-two and a half hours lay between now and that appearance. "You do realize what he'll be like when he awakens?" he asked Methos.

"You've done this before? Methos queried, glancing sideways at the man he was about to bed.

"Once."

"Is it going to be a problem? That he's a kinsman of yours," Methos asked, somewhat awkwardly.

The Highlander half-smiled in response. "No. We weren't raised as brothers, nor cousins. We are kinsmen, true, but by adoption, not birth. There is no blood between us," he finished. "And we have shared love before."

"Good." Methos looked relieved. "I wasn't sure how he would take to having wild and abandoned mindless sex with one male immortal, let alone two. He probably won't notice for the first eight to ten hours, but afterwards ... well, I've seen him angry before."

It was definitely not the most promising way to seduce someone. First they had to move Duncan over to the side of the bed. Then Conner suggested that the various fragile objects d'art would be better off in a different place. Then they were standing in the now bare room facing each other over a semi-lifeless body. "Ritchie would have quit at this point," Methos remarked as he began to remove his clothing.

Conner half smiled, and did the same. "If it was Ramirez here instead of me, he'd be all over you already."

"Ramirez? You knew him?"

The Highlander's voice was muffled as he removed his jersey. "Yes. He's the one who trained me. And told me about you. He said you were a legend."

"Huh! I suppose I have him to thank for making everyone think I was dead. He always was a sore loser."

"Loser? You fought him?"

"Only on the chess board. Except it wasn't called chess, then. It was Shatranj and we played with dice. He was lousy at it." Methos realized he was chattering nervously, and abruptly shut up.

Now naked, the two men again faced each other over Duncan's inert frame. A slight smile crossed Methos' face, then he held out his hand to the older MacLeod. Sword callused fingers gripped his and pulled him forwards, releasing him before their bodies touched. For a moment Methos cursed the vitamin and protein deficient diet that had given him a slender build and left him shorter than the present average. In his own youth, he had stood half a head above his age mates, but better nutrition had caught up with him, and he felt almost dwarfed by the solid Scottish body before him. He looked up, meeting the Highlander's steady gaze, then raised up on his toes to press their lips together. For a few seconds, the kiss was calm, dry, then Conner's tongue peaked out to wet along Methos' lower lip. With a groan, Methos initiated full body contact, pressing himself eagerly against an equally eager partner. Conner's hands ran up Methos' sides, sliding from hip to chest to neck, before gliding through his shortened hair, gripping firmly, bending the ancient immortal backwards, and following him down. The bed was several feet behind Methos, and he blindly walked backwards, groping with one hand to find the edge, and meeting cold flesh.

Suppressing a sudden shudder, he guided Conner back on to the bed, carefully distancing them from their dead compatriot. He said a silent thank you to whichever whim had made Duncan custom build his bed wide enough for three to share comfortably, and returned the Highlander's kiss with undisguised fervor. Already a white mist was building around them, the product of their inherent quickening. A stray thought that enthusiasm and understanding must be conducive to forming a quickening passed fleetingly across his mind, before he gave in and lost himself beneath the younger man. As if merely waiting for his submission, sparks began to leap from one immortal to the other. An inadvertent swipe of Methos' patrician nose against Conner's earlobe caused a convulsive thrust from the man that let him know Conner was more than ready to complete the deed.

Crawling out of the Highlander's grasp, he maneuvered them around until Conner lay panting face up on the bed, and he straddled the blonde's hips. A quick search of the beside table yielded the lubricant he had glimpsed there earlier during the removal of the room's contents, and he squeezed a generous amount of the tube's contents onto his hand, carefully leaving the tube within reach for later use. Conner and Duncan were both big men, and while immortality conveyed a miraculous recovery rate for all cuts and bruises, he preferred to avoid personal injury whenever possible.

Conner watched him coat his hands with the sticky gel, then lower them until they hovered a bare centimeter above his heaving chest. Concentrating fiercely, Methos let the excitement of the moment increase, building a tension between them that had

nowhere to go, except to the immortal beneath him. A small spark leapt from Methos' fingertips to the nipple below, pulling a groan from the until now silent man.

Methos grinned, and inched backwards off the Highlander's hips, releasing the erect cock from where it has been trapped between their bodies. Again he held his hands above the swollen flesh, allowing tiny sparks to play along its length, eliciting deep moans from his partner.

"Damn you, Jason, do it!" Conner's demand was loud and fierce, his skin was flushed and taut. Methos laughed aloud, then let his hands wander over the straining cock. Immediately Conner thrust up, his movements limited by Methos's weight upon him, but gaining some slight relief from the motion.

Methos moved forward along the Highlander's body until Conner's cock was positioned at the entrance to his anus. He took a deep breath, and released it, arched his back and sank down, taking all of the eager flesh inside himself in one move. The aching, piercing sensation slowly faded, and he raised his head to meet the Highlander's eyes. Respect, concern and lust gazed back at him, and he put one finger over his partner's mouth to stop the question hovering on the edge of being asked.

"I'm fine," he said, twitching his inner muscles around the hard invader. He closed his eyes, beginning a rhythmic rise and fall that was hypnotic in its intensity. Not even the sudden shock of a grease covered hand manipulating his own turgid shaft disrupted the rhythm as he pierced himself again and again on the erect cock. Behind his closed eyelids he could see flashes of light reaching across the bed, and he opened his eyes to see Duncan's body raise itself several inches off the covers. Conner too was watching his kinsman, awed by the power they were generating, until Methos clenched his ass muscles firmly, and drew his partner's attention back to him.

Conner redoubled his efforts on Methos' penis, stroking in counterpoint to the erotic internal massage he was giving to the young immortal. A spasm of almost pain blinded him for a moment, and he climaxed. Immediately Conner followed, heaving upwards with enough force to almost throw them off the bed.

The combined energy of their coming pulsed though the mist surrounding them and shot over to Duncan's body, weaving around the floating immortal, whose body arched, eyes wide open and staring. His mouth fell open, and immediately the quickening entered, flowing upwards and inwards. The younger Highlander sank back onto the bed, limp and pale. At first the only sign of life was a slight twitching of his hands, then as Conner and Methos watched in fascination, his skin moved as if it were water, flowing in small ripples from head to toe and back again. Abruptly all the flesh tightened against his bones, then released, and Duncan sat up, reaching out toward the two immortals.

Detaching himself from Conner, Methos met Duncan's outstretched arms, pulling him towards the middle of the bed and drawing him close. Small moans and grunts were the only sound as Duncan burrowed into the warmth offered by Methos' body.

"He's freezing!" Conner exclaimed, crawling over the two entwined figures to lie against his kinsman's back.

"I know," Methos muttered, half under the newly awakened immortal. "He shouldn't take long to ... yep, he's warming up."

Instead of attempting to crawl under Methos' skin, Duncan was now humping against his leg, growling in frustration. He clawed at the body beneath him, his frantic twists and turns only serving to whet his appetite, not satisfy the hunger.

"Do you want me to ..."

"No, I will. Give me some KY, will you?" Methos' hand worked its way out from under the frantic man to receive the lubricant, then returned to coat the Highlander's rigid shaft. Duncan's groans announced the success of that strategy, and for a few minutes he was content to be manipulated, before the hunger rose again.

"It's not enough. He needs ..." Conner's advice was interrupted by the ancient immortal's reply.

"I know. Give me a minute." Methos won a silent clash of wills as he moved his legs to allow Duncan access to his ass. The younger Highlander was eager and big, unheeding of his partner's pain as Methos endured the relentless prodding of sensitive tissue before Duncan found the entrance and sheathed himself in the warm flesh.

"Uhhhhhh." The moan came from both men simultaneously; Methos in distress, Duncan in relief.

"Will you be all right?" Conner asked from the side of the bed. "I'll take a shower and come back."

Breathless beneath the relentless pounding, Methos answer was nonetheless firm. "Sure. Go ahead."

Lying back and thinking of England wasn't going to work. Duncan was rutting with fervor, jarring both body and mind from any easy escape. He could hear the shower running in the bathroom, and a voice singing an old anti-English drinking ditty. In Gaelic. For a time he amused himself by trying to translate the song into every language he'd ever learned, in alphabetical order, but the Urdu tribesman had never developed a word for bastard, and he was stuck with trying to rhyme "many-fathered" with "sheep".

He returned to full awareness to find a dressed Conner hovering over him, shouting and shaking his shoulder. "What?"

"Jason... sorry, Methos, it's been six hours! Take a break," he suggested, removing his clothing, and prying his kinsmen away from the exhausted man.

Moving was painful; the uncomfortable position and the persistent hammering of his flesh had been largely ignoble while lost in his self imposed chore, but the task of turning over and getting off the bed brought every ache and abrasion into sharp focus. He vaguely felt Duncan's hands trying to pull him back, but the older MacLeod took his place, guiding Duncan away from him and roughly applying another thick coating of lubricant before lying face down and spreading his legs.

Methos heard the soft sound of skin sliding over skin as he weaved his way to the bathroom, stomach cramping from hunger and discomfort. He ignored the hunger in favor of running a hot bath, then gathered a large plate of food from the fridge while the bath filled. Six inches short of full, he stopped the water, stepping in without heed of the temperature. Fortunately it was less than boiling and he sank down, leaving only his mouth and nose above the water line. The hot water irritated abraded skin, adding another sting to the catalog of hurts, which slowly faded now that the cause had been removed. He sighed, raised himself slowly and reached for the plate.

Cold pizza. Carrots. Day old sweet and sour Thai chicken. Raw broccoli. Something that looked like meatloaf. An orange and a kiwifruit. Hungry though he was, the meal was less than appetizing. He ate to gain strength, wallowing in the water when he was full, allowing the meal to settle a little, before picking more off the plate. Three times he refilled the tub, thankful that the hot water heater was industrial sized for the gym below, and therefore wouldn't run out of hot water.

He let the last load of water cool to ambient before removing himself from the bath and padding out dripping wet into the kitchen. He paused to turn the lights on, noted the glowing green digital clock on the oven was just going on midnight, and walked over to the bed.

Connor was on his side, asleep, while Duncan still thrust determinedly against him. The sheets below them were sticky with KY, blood and semen. Connor's and his, he supposed, as Duncan would not ejaculate until the last of the Quickening was out of his system. Another twelve hours ought to do it. Unfortunately, Duncan was supposed to be in court in ten hours, dressed and reasonably coherent. Methos took a close look at the dark haired man's face. Blank eyes, with a tight, almost painfully determined set to his jaw, Duncan MacLeod was not going to be up to giving evidence in a court of law. Not unless it was a public lewdness case, and an example was needed!

Remembering the ease with which he and Connor had generated the Quickening to revive Duncan, Methos considered the possibilities. If he let nature take its course, Duncan would be himself again around midday. But the bad guys would walk out of prison, and probably come looking for him. If he tried to speed up events, he didn't know what would happen. He stared off as into the middle distance for a moment, before making his decision.

Connor was rock hard, the pounding on his prostate assuring a constant stimulation that was inescapable in his present position. Methos covered the large erection with his hand, allowing the momentum of Duncan's thrusts to move Connor within his fist.

The double stimulation awoke Connor from his dreamless sleep; he groaned, and rocked back and forth between the two immortals.

"I have a theory," Methos mused as his hand created a haven for Connor to enter.

"Uhhhh." The reply was of an indeterminate nature, but Methos chose to take it as interest. "Since the Quickening that revived Duncan was brought on by

orgasm, and he's only going to fully awaken when he reached orgasm himself, my theory is that if we actively participate instead of passively accepting him, we may be able to awaken him earlier, by letting our orgasms incite the onset of his."

Connor groaned, and flooded Methos' hand with semen. "It's an idea," he gasped. "How do you want to do it?"

"If you can turn around beneath him, Methos said, restraining the unwitting Highlander's reflexive grasping as his partner disappeared out from him. "On your back," he suggested, maneuvering Duncan back into place, and applying yet more lubricant to the rampant flesh.

"Watch his face," Methos instructed as he greased his own erection before carefully sheathing himself in Duncan's body. An unnatural warmth surrounded him; earlier he had thought that the cock piercing him had been exceedingly hot, but had assumed it was his imagination. Now he knew that it was not -Duncan's internal temperature was fever high.

He ignored the heat, concentrating intensely on the feel of the silken channel embracing him. There! a small protrusion rubbed against his glans, and Duncan jolted.

"He opened his eyes," Connor informed him. "They're ..."

"They're what?"

"Blue."

Stilling his movements, Methos peered over Duncan's shoulder to look at Connor. "Blue?"

"Yes, blue. Quickening-blue."

Methos resumed his thrusting, thoughtful.

"What does it mean?"

"How the hell would I know?" he questioned, plaintively. "What am I, the Oracle at Delphi?"

"I thought, since you'd done this before, you **might** have a better idea of what's going on." Connor's tone was sarcastic, but the overall effect was spoilt by his periodic gasps for breath; the combined weight and thrust of the two immortals was driving him deep into the bedding.

"None whatsoever." Silence fell between them, broken only by the soft slap of flesh, and the slight creaking of the bed.

"Sorry." The apology was tendered quietly and accepted the same way.

The mist rose around them, filling the empty spaces with cool air, a shocking contrast to their heated skin. Flashes of blue began threading through the mist, racing over the contours of the entwined men, adding an electric charge to the air. The majority of the blue ribbons concentrated on Duncan, writhing around the immortal in a ever changing pattern. Suddenly an almost solid sheet of blue encased the three men, drawing ever closer until it passed through Methos and Connor and centered on Duncan.

Methos moaned as the quickening went through him, chasing along already sensitized nerve endings. His skin felt as if it were on fire, flaming and regenerating instantly. He stopped moving, concentrating on riding out the pain. Beneath him Connor also stilled. Only Duncan seemed unconcerned, thrusting continuously.

As the quickening slowly sank into the younger MacLeod's skin, it intensified, sending tendrils outwards to ground themselves against the closest objects. As powerful as a full quickening, the lightening flashed around the room, knocking over the few items left in the room, and breaking the windows behind them.

As suddenly as it had started, it stopped. Methos breathed easier as the raw pain left his body, and checked on the two below him. Connor's eyes were closed, a few tears pooled beneath his eyes.

"Connor?" The uncertain voice was barely perceptible over the ragged breathing. Duncan twisted around, trying to see who was behind him, before turning back to his kinsman. "Connor?"

"I'm here, Duncan." The Highlander opened his eyes to meet Duncan's concerned gaze. "How are you?"

"Fine. What happened?"

"What do you remember?" Methos asked.

Duncan frowned. "I was following Kevin Slayter, out at the old gold mine. Then there was a noise, and then ... I woke up here. How long was I dead?"

"Four weeks, roughly. Richie and I finally found you two days ago, but it took us some time to dig you clear. Slayter blew up the entrance after you'd gone in."

"Ahh, not that I'm complaining or anything, but why are we in bed together? All three of us?"

"Um, it was my idea, actually."

"Oh?" The generally muted Scot brogue was heavy.

"You're supposed to be in court tomorrow, ah, this morning. So we sort of ... hurried you awake. We thought.."

"**You** thought!" Connor interjected, quickly passing the blame onto the older immortal.

Methos poked out his tongue at Connor, feeling slightly silly to be reduced to such antics. "I thought that together we could awaken you by sharing a quickening. So we did. And you woke up. Eventually."

"How long is 'eventually'?"

"About twelve hours."

"Twelve! No wonder I'm sore!"

"You're sore!? Try it from this end!" Connor groaned, still pierced by Duncan's rock hard erection. Throughout the explanation, Duncan had remained encased in Connor's flesh, with Methos ensconced in his. He moved now between them, rocking back and forth, re-igniting their desire. "I think I have already," he grinned, tightening his ass muscles around the intruder. He lowered his head to lick away the tears pooled under Connor's eyes, continuing on down to his neck and nuzzling at the sensitive skin under the jawbone.

"Duncan." Connor whispered his name, raising his chin in invitation.

Methos watched the two men become engrossed in each other, feeling like a third wheel. He slipped out of Duncan, and lay beside them on the bed, reaching out a hand to idly trace over a nearby shoulder or back as the two MacLeods made love. Soft murmurs and muted whispers punctuated their actions, and their familiarity with each other was obvious in every touch.

Tearing his gaze away from the lovers, Methos lay back on the bed, one wrist shading his eyes from the overhead light. How long had it been since he had a lover who knew him that well? Who would make love with a near total stranger in order to bring him back? He felt more alone at this moment than he had in centuries, a coldness of spirit creeping over his flesh that had little to do with the lack of windows and the chilly night air. A heavy body pressed him back into the bed. "Running away again?" Duncan asked, a devilish smile upon his face. Methos smiled back without answering, enveloped in the warmth of Duncan's regard. Warm brown eyes wandered over his face, before pausing at his lips. Slowly, almost hesitantly, Duncan lowered his head, kissing Methos with a shy hesitancy completely unlike the Highlander's normal self. Unsure why such diffidence should exist between them, Methos deepened the kiss, drawing Duncan's tongue into his mouth and giving the Highlander leave to explore. Now sure of his welcome, the Highlander plundered the willing mouth, hands roaming over the slight form of the ancient immortal. Beneath him, Methos moaned under the assault, his waning erection hardening with new found purpose. Duncan thrust his tongue back and forth in a promise of things to come before reluctantly breaking the kiss. Once again staring into his eyes, Methos noted the small sparks of blue fighting for prominence in the brown eyes, and knew that Duncan was still under the influence of the Quickening. He reached out blindly for the lubricant tube, and was startled when another hand covered his, guiding him away from the bedside drawer.

A quick glance showed Connor sitting beside him, tube in hand. Connor exchanged a glance with his kinsman, before reaching between Duncan and Methos to coat Duncan's member with the gel. He pushed Duncan over onto his side, and pulled Methos towards him.

Methos felt Duncan edge closer behind him, and lifted his leg over Connor's hip to open himself farther. Strong yet gentle fingers separated his cheeks, then he was impaled swiftly. Connor's wriggling drew his attention away from Duncan, and he watched, momentarily confused as the Highlander moved away from the bed, only to return with a wet cloth. Connor washed the sweat, semen and dried lubricant from Methos's groin, before disappearing back to the bathroom.

Duncan was only peripherally aware of Connor's actions; once again his mind was caught up in blue

fire as the remnants of the quickening raced through his system. This time though he was cogniscent of his partner's identity, and attempted to control his lust. After some experimentation, he found that as soon as he tried to stop thrusting, the urge would overwhelm him, and all thought would flee under the need for completion; but he discovered that if he rode with the urge, he could control the intensity of his motions, curbing the ruthless rutting and making love instead. With that little control returned, he set about ensuring that Methos enjoyed himself.

He snaked a hand over Methos' thigh, reaching for his partner's erection but found instead Connor's shoulder. He levered himself up to look at his partners.

Connor's face was buried in Methos's groin and vice versa. Duncan let the visual stimulation goad him further, until he spilled over. He quickly withdrew from Methos, pulling a groan from himself as his flesh reluctantly left its sheath, before joining Connor at the juncture of Methos' legs. He shoved his kinsmen roughly aside and licked the rampant cock before being pushed aside himself as Connor battled to regain the prize. Back and forth they fought like children over their favorite toy until in silence they agreed to share, and returned to the task at hand.

Methos was partly amused, partly aroused by their by-play until both Highlanders returned their attention to him, and then he had no time for coherent thought as he gave in to his body's needs.

The oral stimulation played on Methos' nerve endings like fire; the knowledge that both MacLeods were cooperating in his seduction fueled his ardor, and he strained to get the necessary friction to orgasm. Quiet whimpers of distress escaped from him, and he growled in frustration.

Connor heard the noise and nudged Duncan, who gave up his hold on Methos' erection to query his kinsman with a raised eyebrow. The faint sounds of frustration were identified and he grinned, moving farther down the bed.

Connor quickly engulfed Methos' hardness, sucking fiercely on the hot flesh. At the same time, Duncan buried a saliva slick finger into Methos' ass, searching for the right place. Methos increased his pace, forcing himself farther down Connor's throat while attempting to rub against Duncan's finger. He came with a half strangled cry, muffled by the cock still within his own mouth, then hurriedly swallowed as Connor came. Exhausted and replete, the three immortals drifted into sleep.

Ritchie woke suddenly to the sound of someone quietly entering the bar. He'd taken refuge here last night after walking aimlessly around the streets all day, glad to escape from the knowledge of what was happening back at the dojo, and had been caught out by the sudden change in the weather. Joe had offered him the spare cot kept in the bar for nights such as these, but he had declined, choosing instead to fall asleep in a quiet corner after the last customer had left. Now he was awake, and reaching for his sword. His dark-attuned eyes easily picked up the stranger creeping across the bar, and he stood up, holding his sword out of sight as he reached out for the light switch.

"Joe, you here?" the visitor called, and switched on the nearest light. Richie hurriedly concealed his sword before the intruder saw him. Recognition was swift and certain on both sides, and the tension increased, Ritchie no longer making any effort to hide his sword. Or his distaste for the Watcher.

Slowly, Joe walked out of the office, blinking heavily. "Hey Dave," he greeted, glancing sideways at Richie. "What's up?"

"It's ..." Dave stopped, pointing with his chin at Richie in the corner.

"Don't worry about him, just tell me. Your assignment was MacLeod tonight, wasn't it? Should be an easy one, he hasn't quite recovered yet, according to Richie."

Richie cursed his fair skin - it was better than a lie detector when he was caught out by a friend. In all his seventeen plus years of petty larceny and assorted juvenile delinquency, never once had his face betrayed him to the police. But when someone he respected caught him lying, it was a dead giveaway. And Joe fell into that category.

"Riche?" Dawson asked, turning to face the young immortal. "Ahh, well, you see, ahhh..."

Joe snorted, and turned back to his late night visitor. "What's going on?"

"I don't know. Maybe they had a fight."

"Hold on, first who is 'they'"?

Dave pulled out the nearest seat and sank back onto it. "I don't know. Look, I saw him," he said, nodding in Richie's direction, "arrive with that British guy and MacLeod's body yesterday morning, and then Richie left and this other guy showed up. Another MacLeod. I recognized his face."

Joe ignored the reference to the British guy - Methos was a secret he had not yet reported to his superiors, another secret kept that clashed with his Watcher's Oath, but not one he felt able to do anything about. "This true, Richie? Connor's in town?"

"Ah, yeah. Family reunion and all that, you know?" The youthful exuberance was back in his voice, although he could still feel the heat of embarrassment on his face. "Didn't think it would take long for you to find out, so I, ah didn't mention it."

"What else, Dave. You mentioned a fight."

"It looked like a Quickening but ..."

"But what?"

"It lasted longer than usual, and was just .. different. I don't know. Anyway, there are only three guys in there, right, and only two immortals, so why were there two light shows? Quickenings just don't happen when there's not another immortal around. At least, that's what they say. So even if one of them killed the other, why would there be another one? I just don't get it."

Joe watched Richie turn an even deeper shade of red before he shooed Dave out of the bar, suggesting he get some sleep and come back in the morning. He locked the door and poured himself a drink before settling into the chair beside Richie.

"You're obviously not at all worried about any of them, so, you want to tell me about it?"

"Not really, Joe. It's a bit .. personal. For them."

"I see. Personal. All three of them." Dawson took a sip of his drink before he voiced his suspicions. "Methos and Connor, they're giving him a Quickening to revive him?"

Richie sat bolt-upright in his chair, nearly knocking over the table and spilling Joe's drink. "You know about it? How come I didn't know? Why doesn't anybody ever tell me these things?" he complained, taking a sip of Dawson's drink and spluttering as the alcohol hit his stomach. "Jesus, what is that?"

Dawson snorted, before reclaiming his glass and finishing it off. "Rum, Richie. Wait another few years before you try it," he advised. He shook his head, staring into the empty glass before carefully putting it on the table. "That's why you came here, is it? Because Connor and Methos were going to.."

"Aw, Jeez, Joe," Richie interrupted. "I really don't want to talk about it, you know?. Duncan's like a father to me. I just don't want to think about it," he repeated, slipping down in the chair and hunching his shoulders. For a moment, he looked like the nineteen year old boy that he was, before his face hardened and he threw a question back at the Watcher. "Are you going to report it?"

A moment's silence, then Dawson shook his head. "No. Not that we don't already know that both Duncan and Connor are bisexual, nor how to hasten an immortal's revival, but ... because he's a friend."

"Thanks, Joe." The reply was quiet but sincere.

Dawson slapped Richie on the back and climbed laboriously to his feet. "Get some sleep, Richie. You probably should get back there soon."

"Not just yet, thanks Joe. I'll be there in time to get Duncan to court."

"Hell, I forgot about that. That's why ..."

"Yeah," Riche acknowledged, cutting of Dawson before anything further was said. "That's why. Goodnight, Joe."

"Goodnight Richie," he said, turning off the lights and leaving the young immortal in the darkened bar.

The presence of another immortal impinged on his senses first, then came the sound of the elevator door being opened. Methos opened his eyes to see Richie walk quickly over to the broken windows, carefully averting his eyes from the three men entwined on the bed.

"Time to rise and shine," Richie called out, studiously staring out at the street below. He cursed as he inadvertently stepped on some of the broken glass, cutting deeply through his sneakers and into his foot. Sitting down heavily on the couch, he pulled out the glass, swearing as he cut his fingers getting it out, and massaging his foot until it healed.

Behind him, Methos nudged his companions awake, stilling their instinctive reach for a sword as Richie's Song entered their awakening minds. Duncan muttered an obscenity and turned over, reaching out for Methos. His eyes fluttered open, and Methos could see the return of small blue flecks.

"Richie, go downstairs for a while," he ordered, drawing Duncan closer to him and bringing Connor's attention to his kinsman's plight.

Richie needed no second warning; he raced for the elevator, barely waiting for the doors to open before pushing the down button repeatedly. "You've got 30 minutes," he shouted, disappearing down below.

"How long is he going to be like this?" Connor asked, before shaking his head. "I know, I know. You don't know how long. At least he's coherent in between times," he stated, yawning heavily. Three more times they had been awakened during the night to slake Duncan's thirst for sex, and the lack of sleep curbed his enthusiasm drastically. He closed his hand around Duncan's member and let the younger Highlander do all the work.

"We're out of KY," Methos reported, pushing the drawer closed and turning to face the two men.

"It's not too bad at the moment," Duncan apologized.

The voice startled the other immortals - they had all but ignored the man between them, and were surprised that he was lucid enough for speech.

"That makes it easier," Methos said, smiling down at the younger man. "I'll do it," he told Connor. "You go take a shower." Connor nodded, and left for the bathroom.

Methos settled himself between Duncan's legs, kissing his way up from his knees to the sensitive skin on his inner thigh. Soft moans greeted his actions; he felt a hand thread itself in his hair, and tug upwards. Methos worked his way up Duncan's body, teasing and tormenting every inch of skin until he reached an erect nipple, brown and pebble hard. He bathed the area gently with his tongue, then bit softly, alternating the two caresses until Duncan was twisting beneath him. Taking pity on the young immortal, Methos left the reddened nub to make a wet trail across the hairless chest, beginning the same pattern of tongue and teeth on the other nipple, until the two were of matching color. He left them alone for a moment, blowing cool air over the heated flesh, allowing Duncan's body to heal itself, before repeating the touches again.

"Methosssss," Duncan moaned, shaking from need. "Pleassse."

Leaving one hand idly toying with the tiny buds, Methos retreated down Duncan's body, before stopping at his groin. He blew lightly on the mushroomed tip, and smiled as Duncan growled warningly at him, before taking the head into his mouth, carefully keeping his teeth away from the sensitive skin. One moment's suction was enough; Duncan emptied himself into Methos' mouth.

Raising his head, Methos saw the young Highlander's face; a silly grin was plastered all over it, and he looked both debauched and dissolute. Methos tapped him on the stomach to get his attention. "Richie's waiting for us downstairs. "Better get a move on," he said, leaving the bed with reluctance.

Connor passed him on the way into the bathroom. "That was quick," he remarked.

"The young these days have no stamina," Methos replied, hastily covering a yawn behind his hand.

Connor laughed and moved out of the way. "Better hurry up in there. Someone else needs the bathroom," he advised, looking over Methos' shoulder.

The oldest immortal looked back and caught his breath. Duncan was standing in a shaft of sunlight in front of the glass-less window, slowly moving through a tai' chi exercise. His muscular form and physique were displayed perfectly as he floated through the movements, calmly centering himself for the day ahead. Methos swallowed heavily, and went into the bathroom, after having imprinted the image of the Highlander's naked body haloed by the morning sun into his memory.

Richie refused to meet Duncan's eyes as they gathered in the dojo, ushering them out as quickly as possible before heading towards the garage and Duncan's car.

Duncan stared after him, hurt by the boy's actions. Methos touched his arm. "Give him time, he'll get over it," he said. "We'll take my car," Connor announced, stopping beside an old battered van.

"Why?" Richie's rash question was shut off abruptly as the reason suddenly hit home. He blushed fiercely red, and slid quickly into the front passenger's seat, staring hard at his feet. He didn't want to think about why taking Duncan's convertible would be a bad idea. He didn't want to think about what he knew the three men had been doing last night and he most certainly did not want to think about what the sight of the three naked men had done to him when he entered the loft this morning. "It's going to rain later," Methos offered as an excuse, getting into the back seat, and sliding the door shut behind him.

"Yeah, right," Richie muttered.

"Mr MacLeod, please answer the question." The Judge's voice was loud beside him. Duncan closed his eyes, bit his tongue and tried desperately to concentrate on responding to the defense attorney's question. He could feel the Quickening sparking along his veins, the slow build-up of energy he knew could only be released by another's touch. He'd been on then stand for twenty minutes; hopefully he would be able to leave soon. He mentally ran through the first few steps of a kata, clearing all other thoughts, and calmly answered the question.

Methos could see the tension rising in the Highlander. His answers were slow and deliberate, with long pauses. His eyes were closed, but Methos imagined they were once again shot through with blue threads.

The attorney gave up as Duncan reiterated the same evidence again; unable to either discredit the witness nor shake his story, he let Duncan step down from the stand.

Connor stood up as Duncan walked past him, weaving slightly, and guided him out of the court.

Methos drew the prosecution attorney's attention, asking quietly if Duncan was needed again before he followed the two MacLeods and Richie out to the car.

"Let's take him home," Methos said.

"What about them?" Richie asked, gesturing at the courthouse.

"The lawyer said Duncan wasn't required again. Apparently he's no longer the only witness," Methos reported as he walked around the van. He barely managed to close the door before Duncan pulled him close, nuzzling against his neck. The Highlander's hands were plucking at his clothing, and they fell sideways on the back seat as Connor pulled out of the carpark sharply.

Richie groaned as he caught a glimpse of the goings on in the back seat. "Jeez, doesn't he ever stop?" he complained.

Connor glanced sideways at the young immortal before he returned his attention to the road. "He can't help it, you know," he said quietly.

"I know." The reply was sullen.

"I'm not sure that you do. Do you remember your first Quickening? Remember that first rush of adrenaline, when all you could feel was the fire in your body? It was orgasmic, wasn't it? That's what he's feeling now."

Richie blushed. Duncan had warned him about that side effect of Quickenings, but until he had actually experienced it himself, he had discounted MacLeod's warnings. Coming back to awareness after taking Mako's head, he'd been conscious of a wetness in his jeans, and a raging hard on that had not wanted to go away. If that was what Duncan was feeling, it was no wonder he was making out in the back of the van like a teenager. Richie risked a quick look in the back seat, but turned away immediately. There were some things that friends just weren't supposed to see, and this was one of them. He sat quietly for the duration of the drive back to the dojo, and ignored the sounds coming from the back.

When the van stopped, Richie was the first out, walking away from the vehicle to take a deep breath, before following the other immortals into the building. Duncan was at the dojo's landing, and Richie ran to catch up with him. He put his hand on Duncan's shoulder, stopping the Highlander from continuing upwards to his loft.

MacLeod turned around when he felt someone touch him, stiffening a little when he saw it was Richie, but waited patiently for the boy to speak.

"Ah, you ok, Mac?" Ryan asked.

Duncan smiled. "Yeah, Richie, I'm okay."

"Good." Richie said, nodding his head. "I'm just going to ring the glaziers about the windows. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Sure, Rich," Duncan agreed, continuing up the stairs.

Methos watched the two immortals part company, pleased for Duncan's sake that his student had come to terms with the situation. He didn't know how long MacLeod would continue in his current condition, but he did know that he would be here for as long as it took. He watched Connor walk over to his kinsmen, and the two put their heads together, whispering, before turning to face him. "Coming, Methos?' Connor called, already shedding his clothes.

"Not yet, but he will be," Duncan added, grinning.

Methos looked at the two men, so different yet so alike, both young, eager and ready, so they thought, for anything. *Oh God, it was age and experience versus youth and enthusiasm times two.* He'd be lucky if he survived the day. Smiling, he went to meet his fate.